

**Robert Breer: Single-frame Aesthetics and Inherited Modernisms in
Relation to the Neo-avant-garde and Debates on Film Animation**

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I, Sonia Bridge confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

Breer's cross-disciplinary process and self-reflexive exploration of the single-frame within film presents an intensive questioning of representation, movement, and the hierarchies of form that taps into the debates of mid twentieth-century art. Having an approach that is unparalleled within the discipline of animation, Breer's work constellates the renewed interest in the avant-garde from absolute abstraction to collage, along with abstract expressionism. Involving the use of non-art materials and technology in an endeavor to refigure the status of the everyday, Breer's work also participates in the wide-ranging transformation of art, beyond traditional mediums and more fundamentally raises questions about the technical mediation of experience. The refusal in Breer's practice of the imaginary of conventional cinema and commercial studio animation is underscored by the recourse in his work to the 'low arts' of early popular animation and pre-cinematic devices which lay bare the underlying mechanics of film in a manner that nevertheless celebrates the appeal of its pleasures. Despite shared engagements with the neo-avant-garde, Breer's cinematic assemblages presented a challenge to postwar plurality, and its recognizability was hindered by the marked novelty and art-institutional marginalization of animation-film then prevalent. The conceptual valence of Breer's work, which questions its status as art, reflects upon its complex and contradictory historicity, and mediates between the principles of form and the so-called failure of craft, gains a renewed relevance today beyond the revival of retro-modernism, and in an era in which the technique of animation has become ubiquitous. This thesis sets out to recover the witty deflationary tactics and criticality of the aesthetic questions raised by Breer's animated films. The practice component revolves around the materiality and analogue confluence of the digital moving-image; three short animated-sketches present inscriptions of everydayness and ephemerality as part of a recursively obsolescent gaze upon its single-frame image-objects.

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INTRODUCTION

In what ways is Breer unique & in what ways can he be situated within the cultural production of the times?

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A Neo-avant-garde & Postconceptual Reworking

While the moving-image has become a given in the sphere of art, and animation a ubiquitous technique, Robert Breer's practice, commencing in the mid-1950s, extensively involving the experimental possibilities of the non-art medium of animation-film, directed toward a spirited yet self-reflexively critical aesthetic, would have presented a determinate challenge. Breer's distinctive practice of excavating the moving-image is at once a breakdown and re-construction of its fundamental principles, which likewise refunctions animation in the lineage of the popular and 'low-arts' of pre-cinematic objects and displays, such as the flip-book, mutoscope, thaumatrope, and slide projector.

Breer's animated works uniquely tackle the emergent tendencies of Op Art and Kineticism, announced with *Le Mouvement Exhibition*, 1955, and brought together within its scope are the shifting status of non-objective abstraction, the new conceptualization and technical challenge of time and movement or its semblance, confrontation with the accelerating and mediated nature of the image, and concomitant development of the significance of perception. Breer's mediation in film of the mechanics of its image and structuration of its form periodically presents an increasingly disjunctive, even anti-kinetic, consideration of cinema's movement. These early cinematic collages can, likewise, be conceived in terms of addressing the tendency in art of assemblage, which gains a degree of prevalence during the postwar period, and culminates with the MoMA exhibition and 'Art of Assemblage' Symposium, 1961 with the notable exclusion, however, of film. Accordingly, the (art-institutional) recognizability of Breer's practice in a non-traditional medium, or the legibility of the form and specificity of the questions that arise from it explored in this challenging manner would have been considerably obscured by its historical marginalization and consequent lack of critical attention within the sphere of art.

This investigation will aim to examine the nexus of Breer's work and recover a critical sense in the afterlife of Breer's animation-films. To these ends, it will be attentive to the historical

differences in the discourse of experimental animation, avant-garde, structural-formalist film, and the once hierarchical priority of the established mediums in Fine Art, such as, painting, and sculpture, against which Breer's work has been variously situated and received. Breer's practice in this perspective becomes a crucible from which to consider the problematic of these once engrained boundaries, and their breach, reoriented by questions of perception, the limits of the visible, and the primacy of visuality through a critical engagement with the form and technology of animation-film. The thesis will delve into the multidisciplinary and transcategorical potential of animation-film suggested by Breer's practice and the often exhilarating, and thought-provoking imbrication of the modernist abstraction, collage, the graphic arts e.g. figurative, drawing, typography, other lens-based, and pre-cinematic technology, as well as sonic and sculptural components.

From this vantage point, it will be argued that Breer's approach to animation also offers a distinct view with its particular filmic 'retrieval of the aesthetic dimensions of historically received arts'.¹ Through close readings of Breer's works, with attention given to the detail and tenor of its aesthetic struggles, it becomes possible to rethink the impact of various received traditions within modernism. The strategies of the work will be investigated not only for how it might be placed within such an inheritance as is typically acknowledged, but also importantly for how these early works can be differentiated. In this way, Breer's work will be considered a response to the problematic of aesthetics held between its once complete accord with medium-specificity in the 'legitimizing discourse' of formalist modernism, and conversely, the anti-aestheticism underscoring the anti-art assertions of Dada, (expressed differently again latterly with critical postmodernism).² The nascent difficulties captured in Breer's work of this period will be touched on as it unfolds between, for instance, the resurgence of aesthetic indifference within conceptualism and Pop-art's aestheticism and apparently affirmative tone. The discussion will explore the means by which Breer's work navigates the long-held antagonism to aesthetics, which became unduly complicit, as Avanessian (2011, p.4) suggests, with 'spectacle and the commercial aestheticization of everyday life'.

Instead, the profound effect of cine- and photographic technology on the realm of the image within urban modernity is explored as part of the consideration and reflection of aspects of modern life in Breer's work, which has traces of what Osborne (2013, p.78), philosopher and critical theorist of art, has described in his schema of art as 'aesthetic modernism'. Breer's utilization of animation as part of a single-frame aesthetic evokes on the one hand a sense of acceleration and contraction of time, which is suggestive of the abridgement of experience

¹ (Osborne, 2013, p.79)

² (Avanessian & Skrebowski, 2011, p.2)

associated with the disruption of continuity faced with the bombardment and regimentation of late modernity. On the other hand, the often irreverent, transient gestures, scattered observations and staccato impressions presented within Breer's works also convey the stimulating estrangement, vibrant agitation, and plenitude of the everyday, whose pluripotency is expressed, rather than the determination of the singularity and essence of abstraction in forms.

Breer's (Trainor, 1979, p.18) 'everything goes' attitude, exemplified by the inclusion of aspects of popular modernism's objects, techniques, and technology, is also magnified by the potential untimeliness of the references to the 'low-art' of cartoon-animation itself, and the precarious pursuit that artistic autonomy in animation-film once posed. Nevertheless, the strategies Breer employs throughout his work, to construct critical relations between art and animation will be probed, as well as the way he distances his work from the 'anything goes' depoliticized anti-aesthetic tendency of later (reactionary) postmodernism. Even so, it is likely that the abrupt onslaught of the 'everything goes' aesthetic of Breer's animation-film, quickened by its neo-dadaist, and deflationary humour, would have exacerbated the potential difficulty of its initial reception. The ways in which Breer's oeuvre present a penetratingly 'neutral' attitude in its nonhierarchical incorporation of nonart objects as part of a witty transposition of the high-art problems of post-cubist form into everyday discourse, along with the keenly exploratory and at times expressive tackling of the fundamental aspects of the medium will be elaborated in terms of its meld of proto-structural film, pre-pop and *para-conceptual* frameworks.

*the problematic of Breer's single frame aesthetics:
an elaboration of the contradictions of kinetics in the 'moving-image'*

✂

transmedia and photographic condition of animation-film

Para-conceptual is a term utilized here to give emphasis to the 'aesthetic logic' (Richter) and potential conceptuality of modern abstraction and the structuration of form in a tendency that, moreover, eschews art's dematerialization associated with the escalating preeminence of the idea that emerges with the momentous discourse and debates of 1960s conceptualism. Writing on this perspectival shift underway with the growing conceptual impact of Duchamp on the postwar *neo-avant-garde*, Osborne (2013, p.49) has more recently argued, however, that it brought 'once again to light, in a more decisive way, the necessary conceptuality of the work which had been buried by the aesthetic ideology of formalist modernism – a conceptuality which was always historically

central to the allegorical function of art.’ The mediation of material and aesthetic connections within Breer’s *para-conceptual* approach to animation, and development of a single-frame aesthetic will in this way be differentiated to the subsequently growing conceptual nominalism of the 1960s, which, nonetheless, presented radical negations in art against the increasingly reductive confines of traditional mediums and art’s primary legitimation via the construct of *medium-specificity* associated with Greenberg.³

Endeavoring to salvage a sense of the modernist concern with the ‘aesthetic logic’ (Richter) of form, as part of a *para-conceptual* engagement with animation-film, attention will be paid to the nuances of Breer’s practice, often asserted at the point of disjuncture between the structuration of abstract form, the materialization of representational modes and their dis-ordered disassembling. The critical reinvention of elements taken from established modes and mediums, as well as their clash together with old, popular, non-art, and new technology in the single-frame aesthetic and experimental processes of Breer’s films is not only found in his innovative and more noted early works but is also sustained throughout his oeuvre.

While the structuration and content-of-form is central to Breer’s practice, and stems in part from an encounter with works encompassed by Greenbergian framework, this thesis will also, and indeed necessarily, reflect upon the allusions that arise through the experimental processes, modes of materialization and *para-conceptual* generation of the image-content. Despite the perceived limits of non-objective abstraction that become apparent, during this post-war period, it will be shown that the liminal edge it presents to representation and more fundamentally to perception is never fully abandoned throughout Breer’s oeuvre.

The transformation of the scope of abstraction, in Breer’s early work, is for this period, unusually mediated through the frame of the moving-image. Expanding this problematic, Osborne (1991, p.69) will be drawn upon who has likewise suggested that technical reproducibility becomes pivotal in the reframing of abstraction in art, with the self-reflexive honing of certain aspects of production processes. Given the initial scope of Breer’s work, it will be touched on not only for its involvement with the graphic (non-objective and representational) possibilities of the form but also for how it engages with the problematic of technological reproducibility, honing in on the single-frame which immanently opens out again to the ‘transmedia’ condition of the photographic (Osborne, 2013, p.118). Equally, the way Breer’s transverse approach to animation-film in the development of the *Form Phases* series, comes to encompass these key features through a mediation of painting, flipbooks, and slides, will be considered in light of the notion of

³ (Avanessian & Skrebowski, 2011)

medium *differential-specificity* (Krauss, 1999a, pp.44, 53) which moves beyond the constrictions of *medium-specificity* and the reductive tendency of its abstractions to present a new temporal poetics.

Breer's work will be approached as indicative of an encounter with the vital transformations of art and everyday experience wrought by the prevailing impact of lens-based technologies, from its (industrial) scale and mass-distribution, to the cultural array of its repertoires. Breer's engagement with the photographic image of time-based media occurred, moreover, at a time when photography itself was not yet as widely accepted as an integral part of artistic practice as it is today. It becomes increasingly integrated into the questions of art as is evident, in divergent ways, with the subsequent developments of pop-art, performance and conceptualism. More broadly, Breer's work will be considered in terms of the shifting 'framing conditions of representation', posited by Osborne (1991, p.70) (2013), as part of a periodization of the changing ontology of art.

In this vein, the importance of the self-reflexivity of technique, will not be limited to formal considerations (prominent within formalist modernism), but will aim to touch on an account of the possible political implications of form, in which the changing significance of evolving technological forms and techniques on the structure of experience is raised as part of the broader question of modernity. Within this conundrum, and locating the critical development of abstraction between its heteronomous determinations and the leverage sought through art's autonomy, Osborne (1991, p.62) argues, that part of art's difficulty becomes the translation of the 'social determinations of artistic practice into its understanding of *aesthetic* or artistic categories'. This raises the problematic of the *politics of representation*⁴ which the practices within the nascent field of experimental and avant-garde film address at a certain level, and which it will be argued is evident in the confrontations and engagements of Breer's work in animation-film.

Given that Breer's work has customarily been positioned in relation to the genre of avant-garde film, this thesis will open up this problematic by touching on the increasingly disputed framework of the historical avant-garde's failure, and the *neo-avant-garde's* capitulation by its art-institutionalization, drawing on arguments by theorists such as Bürger, Buchloh, Foster. (Roberts' recent interjection, it should be added, refutes the historicity of the avant-garde impetus with a polemic of its continuing critical force.)

⁴ This can be differentiated from the 'representation of politics', and in relation to experimental film points to alternative relations to the viewer engaged, along with a rebuttal of the conventions of representation in dominant cinema with its normative and homogenizing worldview reproduced through its mechanisms of identification and investment in the star system, cult of celebrity, media franchises etc.

To foster a critical framework in which to situate Breer's work, it becomes crucial not only to substantiate the work's formal qualities, as Roberts' (2015, p.10) argues, but also to scrutinize how its construction may be mediated by the notion of form bearing cultural and historical meaning. For this a range of thinkers will be drawn upon, such as Krauss, Osborne, Roberts, Groys etc. whose work stems out of the legacy of Marxian historical-materialist thought, attentive to the problematic of aesthetic experience, (in a dialectic between art's committed imbrication with life on the one hand and its crucial flashpoints of independence on the other). On the question of historical experience, however, it is Benjamin's speculative and galvanizing conceptualization that provides an implicit frame within which the dynamic processes of change evoked by Breer's work, and its shifting circumstances, are tackled as an opening to reassess the assumptions of the present.⁵ To this extent, the thesis will also aim to give a sense of the struggles within Breer's approach and its roots in the powerful inclination of late modern and avant-garde debates on the transformative potentiality of art and the forces inherent within its aesthetic logic.

Breer's single-frame aesthetic has, until recently, been primarily encompassed in the disciplinary development and critical appreciation of independent experimental film and animation, typified by a rejection of narrative cinematic norms and a commitment to alternative modes which characterizes this diverse field.⁶ With the profound impact and dominance of entertainment animation and the Disney studio-system, on the one hand, and Hollywood on the other, Breer as with other artists' utilizing film, along with experimental filmmakers, sought to distance their work from the industry's conventions and foundations. It was also in the period of the late 1940s that small-scale communities of independent, experimental filmmakers began to flourish with the development of a film culture that insisted upon a reinvention of its language and conventional limits.⁷ While Breer maintains that his concern with film did not originate within this context, it was, importantly, a sphere where the possibilities and implications of animation for the filmic-image was not routinely set apart, as animation historian Bendazzi (1994, p.140) has maintained, which is typical of the discourses of conventional film and traditional, or cartoon animation. However, it is the extensive transformation of the fortunes of animation which Breer helped pioneer within the sphere of art, which was undertaken largely without fanfare and in an

⁵ As developed in Benjamin's (1999a, p.471) notion of the *dialectical image* of an image seized collectively from the standpoint of an interruptive and radically open present that redresses the character of temporality within modernity (e.g. the certainty of progress) with the critical potential of the now. For Benjamin (1973b, p.247) the reflexive 'now of recognizability' within the (historical-)present entails making legible the dynamic processes of change possible within it, otherwise 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably'.

⁶ See: (Burford, 1999), (Macdonald, 1992), (Curtis, 1983) Curtis (Breer, 1985), (Russett, 1976), (Gardner, 1976).

⁷ See: (Moritz, 1996), (Fisher, 1984, p.146), and Breer (Macdonald, 2002, p.387) on Vogel's Cinema 16, Film Society, 1947-63, NY, and the inception of Mekas' Filmmaker's Cooperative, New American Film Group, 1962.

undaunted pursuit of lines of enquiry posed not ultimately in the objective essence but the complexity of the filmic form that is taken up here.

Within this discourse, key texts have aimed to canonize Breer's work broadly in modernist and avant-garde lineages.⁸ Building on such frameworks, this thesis will aim to differentiate its scrutiny by developing a conception of the way certain inherited aspects of the artistic tradition, such as, the absolute abstraction of *neoplasticism*, and the avant-garde aesthetics of collage are re-staged in Breer's moving-image work. Such repossessions, it will be argued, are not simply an extended canonization of its previous significance. Rather, it could be said that after the remarkable leap of post-cubist abstraction, the traces of the representational problems of movement reappear in Breer's work, with considerably altered (*para-conceptual*) implications in the medium of film. Countering the tendency by which the discourses of animation, experimental film, as well as art have previously tended to mitigate the potential of dissension in Breer's work within such a lineage, this thesis will endeavor to reposition Breer's practice in animation-film in a Janus-faced relation with the crucial contemporaneous problems characteristic more broadly of the *neo-avant-garde* art, with its reinvention and mediation of modernist and avant-garde movements.

Breer's work and his assertions to situate it, obtained from interviews, not only reflects these seismic shifts, but also contributes, as will be shown, to the critical crisis of what became perceived as the (Greenbergian) hegemony of the modernist project. This crisis entailed escalating disputes over the interpretive framework and associated possibilities of the meanings of abstraction. Furthermore, the sway of formalist modernism evoked in Breer's early work becomes reframed here when it is grasped as part of the historical consciousness of the artwork. This has implications, not only for how works might be contextualized but also as Osborne (1991, p.69) argues for the 'ontology of the artwork', for which he outlines a schema that aims to intersect conventional disputes between abstraction and figuration, as part of the renewal of the 'question of modernism's critical legacy'. It is additionally through, what Osborne, and Roberts amongst others, broadly periodize as the current *postconceptual* framework, that the dynamic between the conceptual valence and 'aesthetic logic' of form in key works of modern abstraction, referenced by Breer work, might also be reopened.

Breer's critical negotiation of the often heroically abstract iconography and 'strong signs' (Groys, 2010, p.4) of high modernism from the scope of experimental animation-film, becomes part of an investigative and inventive attitude toward the material parameters and perceptual thresholds of the cinematic object, and aesthetic interrogation of the hierarchies and conventions of form,

⁸ See: (Sitney, 2002), (Mendelson, 1981).

which underpins his striking use of non-art objects, and technology. This dynamic standpoint is attuned to the capacity of the form for assemblage, as well as, the photographic-basis of the medium, operating, as noted, between a certain aesthetic impartiality in its *structuration without structure*⁹ that conversely communicates a fascination with materials and immersion in the (cinematic) object. Yet, this tactile filmic preoccupation with details and minutiae, along with the profuse inclusion of figurative and representational forms encountered in quotidian experience, counteracted by seemingly spur-of-the-moment non-objective abstractions may have been potentially baffling to the discourse and institutions of art in this period. In this vein, Breer's approach will be characterized as an 'instinctive materialism',¹⁰ which moreover, it will be argued has resonance with what Groys (2010) has described as the recourse in art towards a 'weak universalism' after high modernism, as well as its critical moments of humor with the deflationary aesthetics elucidated by Roberts (2002).

Such work presents a contradictory method within the period of late modernism, and what O'Doherty (1973, p.192) has described as its endemic 'politics of exclusion', that involved the diminishment of temporal, and social aspects of objects and space, as well as the evident omission of time-based work, which was further proclaimed by the construct of the non-place and apparent neutrality of the gallery space as a self-contained white-cube.¹¹ Within this scope, Breer's practice will be elaborated upon for the way it utilizes the technique of animation, yet refuses the traditional limitations and ideological underpinning of the genre, while, nonetheless, celebrating the 'low-art' and tremendous ingenuity that is integral to the early popular cultural reach of classic cartoons. While Breer's films create transient and arresting clashes of the seemingly inconsequential in which conventional meaning unravels with heterodox possibilities, this approach palpably diverges from the elevated, and serious-minded appreciation of art's timeless and enduring values typically endorsed within the official artworld and institutional discourse, despite the emerging plurality of postwar art.

By contrast, and with the complexity of animation increasingly appreciated, at present, within the sphere of art, this thesis aims to show how Breer's practice vividly refracts and utilizes animation as a technique to deconstruct film, interrogate perception, as it reframes the inherited traditions of art, as well as presenting a readymade-like intervention into art's institutional sphere, and equally as a pre-pop appropriation of its rich, varied, cultural manifestations. It should be stressed, on the other hand, that animation now has the potential to be effortlessly recouped by

⁹ (Barthes, 1974, p.5)

¹⁰ (Berger, 1963, p.114) A phrase drawn from Berger's discussion of the keen sensibility of the commonality and humanism of Léger's materialism but also how he 'put the facts of the environment first and through them arrived at his attitude to life. [...] Léger began with the machine. His cubism is untheoretical.' (Berger, 2001, pp.54, 55)

¹¹ See also: (O'Doherty, 1976)

artists, and has, since the ‘digital revolution’ of the mid 1990s, become widely recognized as a key facet of the moving-image, and a ubiquitous technique across wide-ranging fields. Yet, it is also at this juncture, that the particularity of the aesthetic struggles in Breer’s work can become obscured by the overfamiliarity and casual impression of its fluency related to its engaging eclecticism, the unpredictable, fleeting fluidity of its direction, apparent discord of its rhythms, and the energetically honed informality of its style. This thesis aims to highlight the playful aesthetic difficulties, and effective contradictions which arise as part of the art’s *work* primarily in the medium of animation-film, whose ready acceptance in a present-day context may also potentially mask the critical verve, and particularity of the address to the proscribed limits and characterization of art itself.

Against the elision of the aesthetic possibilities of (filmic) form, or, even the disciplining of it in terms of the recent prominence of the discourse of the gallery context and its viewing habits,¹² this thesis intends to recapture Breer’s engagement with the aesthetic debates in art and their mediation through the apparatus of animation-film, treated variously as object, image and idea. At this level, the ambition of the thesis is to contribute to the debates between the spheres of art and experimental film, with an appreciation of the potential implications, which the conceptual and structural framework of animation, itself, may spark. It will be argued that a critical relation to the conventions of both art and the cinema-situation is suggested by the single-frame aesthetic of Breer’s work, and its particular conceptualization of the apparatus of film. It is also the (historical) incongruity between these spheres that affords a productive space from which to recover Breer’s dynamic sensibility in animation-film, which touches on the problematic of culture’s democratization, as well as the unsparing aesthetic potentiality of cinematic collage as part of its reflexive critique. The critical object of animation-film, the problem of the primacy of visuality, perception and the limits of the visible, along with the hybrid, machinic vision associated with the particular treatment of the cinematic apparatus comprise, as will be shown, the reflexive core of Breer’s films and is central not only to the concept of many of his works, particularly *Recreation*, 1956 and *Eyewash*, 1959, but also to the broader conception of the filmic image within his oeuvre.

To this extent, the *para-conceptual* problems raised by Breer’s work have interesting resonances with our own period, often characterized as *postconceptual*, and riven as it has become by the resurgence and negotiation of materials, the *post-medium* condition (Krauss), and the ‘aesthetic dimension of historically received arts’ as part of (post)aesthetic considerations, amidst the persistence, nevertheless, of art’s conceptual legitimation. This thesis will aim to articulate the

¹² See Rees (2012, p.182) ‘Films for Empty Rooms’ on the historically disparate tradition of experimental film and gallery video in which “‘the fine arts community’ and ‘media art’ - ignore the avant-garde” only to replicate many of its strategies in a context and discourse unfamiliar with its disputes.

nexus of Breer's art film, with a view to how it may concurrently present insights for a *postconceptual* perspective, redressing the (post)aesthetic commitments of Breer's image without enacting, as Osborne (1991, p.71) cautions, a 'reinstitution of the traditional notion of the aesthetic object'. 'Everything turns', Osborne continues, 'on the sense in which conceptual art may be understood as the culmination of the movement toward abstraction (a recognition that the ontology of a work of art is bound up with the social history of its forms)'.

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*a revaluation of the relationship between image-content and the content-of-form:
the challenge of close readings of experimental animation-film*

Breer's (1973a, p.70) contention that his cinematic collages be experienced within the domain of the image is initially rooted in a modernist enquiry to reveal the limits and basic 'edge problem' of film. His films have been commended, for instance, in the field of avant-garde and experimental film, associated with the journal *Film Culture* (1973, p.23) for the 'thresholds of rapid montage', 'exploration of collage film' and 'enrichment of formal cinema'. This formal emphasis is echoed by the chiefly subsidiary status with which, the avant-garde film theorist and historian, Sitney treats image-content when he comes to describe structural films, with Breer's work as a precursor. This framework has echoes of the Greenbergian tradition of modernism in which the expressive dimension is recognized as necessary, but even for abstract expressionism, as Osborne (1991, p.66) points out, it is the post-cubist exploration of the 'pure physicality of pictorial means' and postulated material objectivity of the medium that is felt to be significantly expressed. In such a perspective other possibilities of the content of abstract expression are not rendered central to the meaning of the work, such as its potential conceptuality, the ethico-spiritual ideals that have underpinned modernism, or the implicit possibility that it presents an expression of alienation, if not, entanglement in the dreams and awakening of the collective from the nightmare of an increasingly entrenched commodity society.¹³

Counter to this perspective, the significance of the content-of-form, expression, and crucially its relation to image-content, along with the connections and dis-associative interactions that arise will, in this thesis, be open to investigation as part of a detailed elucidation of Breer's films. For Sitney (1973, p.30) the abstract expressionistic, and romantic, visionary quality of some avant-garde films is distinguished by a subjective mythopoesis, as exemplified by Brakhage, by contrast,

¹³ While one of the frameworks Osborne (1991, p.67) focuses on is the 'spiritual abstraction' of Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian, this has not been part of my particular emphasis on Mondrian etc., more important is his critique of Greenberg's modernism in contrast to Adorno's 'socialized account of artistic autonomy', before he embarks on the problem of representation, abstraction and reception within *postconceptual* painting.

as previously indicated, Breer is differentiated as an 'extreme formalist'. Breer's concern with conventions, in Sitney's (p.31) schema, is not associated with their paradoxical undoing, but is primarily underscored in terms of the demythologization and depersonalization of its objects. As part of the reconsideration of the problematic of such divisions and the historically changing dynamic between abstraction, expression, and the question of the 'material subjectivity'¹⁴ of the artist, it will be shown that Breer's approach to the moving-image is generated out of an intensive questioning of materials, form, and conventions.

It should be noted that although the implicit structure evoked by Breer's work and processes tends to be part of a destabilizing force and not highly personalized (or mythologized), the subject of perception in the discourse of experimental animation film, has nevertheless, been largely enveloped within a depoliticizing, desocialized frame and presented individualistically. Breer's shifting relation to the myth and 'material subjectivity' of the artist will be a thread that runs through this thesis, even as it is initially curbed by the proto-structuralist objectivity of his early work. Consequently, the problematic of the subject of expression and processes of abstraction will, rather, be tackled here in relation to nascent pop-art attitudes (in a trajectory that skirts the later tendency of parodic mimicry), and, for instance, the conceptualization of form, which characteristically re-emerges with the *neo-avant-garde*.

In this vein, attention must be given to the way Breer's practice taps into twentieth-century disputes by reopening questions of the status and logic of abstraction, as well as the dynamics within animation between its heteronomous determinations and potential for critical autonomy. In Breer's early work, this is expressed through the assertion of animation-film-as-art, which it will be shown, initially presents an interjection into the received discourses of the modernist ideals of 'absolute' abstraction, e.g. *Form Phases IV*, 1954, along with a renewed concern with the historical avant-garde's rejection by collage of traditional aestheticism, e.g. *Recreation*, 1956.

These early works will be examined as part of a speculative encounter through animation-film with the diverse and complex artistic strategies of abstraction expressed by the *new realisms* of artwork by figures, such as Mondrian, Richter, Schwitters and Léger, in response to the triumphal iconography of capitalist and industrial modernity.¹⁵ The exchanges, manifesto declarations, and writings of avant-garde artists becomes an increasingly integral part of arts discourse in this (interwar) period, envisioned as polemic and associated with aesthetic research, and will also be

¹⁴ (Osborne, 1991, p.63)

¹⁵ Other examples include the Constructivist-Supremacist's graphic quotation of the tropes of machine design, the playful mythologies and puns of the mechanical symbolism by Picabia, Duchamp etc., as well as the Futurist's evocation of speed and simultaneity via the modern mechanisms of the automobile, photography, and press industry.

consulted. Likewise, the unorthodox and personal insights into the processes and systems which arise from the implications of post-cubist, non-objective and expressive abstraction, by the composer Feldman, acutely conversant with the art-scene at this postwar juncture, will also be drawn upon, to reactivate a sense of the transformative scope, lively insistence and range of the discourse.

As part of this endeavor, Breer's cinematic-collages will be set against wider debates arising out of the machine aesthetics in art and popular modernism. For this argument, a sense of the avant-garde's invigoration of the potential of (new) technology, as part of the interrogation of modern experience, and its upheavals, along with the effects of technologization on perception, is important when probing the principals at play in Breer's montages. While the evocation of the machinic assemblage of Breer's approach has parallels with the avant-garde's counter rhythms, the broader sense of constructive optimism expressed through some of these earlier abstractions will be touched on to distinguish Breer's approach.

The optimism espoused by Léger in the synergy of his human-machine conjunctions in *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924, for instance, will be touched on, with its transformed evocation of Dada's burlesque cyborgs and satirical performance events – the carnival of the modern on the cusp of self-disintegration. Relevant to this context is Breer's subversion of the quasi-architectonic divisions and spatio-temporal trajectory of the *neoplastic-style* abstraction in Richter's film, *Rhythm 21*, 1921, with *Form Phases IV*, 1954. In relation to the principles of 'absolute' nonobjective abstraction, and through close readings of Breer's works, in juxtaposition with his statements on the circumstances and conditions of the work, open equally to assessment, it will be argued that his practice does not pursue the earlier modernist's ambition within *neoplasticism* for dynamic harmony, but becomes oriented by the problematic of dissonance and *anti-continuity*.

This is set against an image disseminated across the urban mediascape in 1950s America, which will provide the backdrop of the machine aesthetics of postwar consumerism, typified by the desires for speed and freedom, and entrenchment of the idea of progress associated with industrialized modernity, and which is epitomized by the popular art and culture of the automobile. Conjuring a sense of the competing aspirations associated with post-war America, the centrality of car culture becomes part of a speculation on the possible critical impetus underlying the defunctionalization of movement in the anti-kinetic-kineticism of Breer's practice and treatment of film as (conditional) object. In this vein, it will be suggested that the attentiveness in Breer's works to cinematic illusionism likewise presents a contradiction of the instrumentalized gauge, which underpins the spectacle of capitalism. Breer's consideration of the

semblance of motion in animation-film is haunted by the supposed transparency and positivism of the photographic with its industrialized dissection of time and motion.

To give a wide-ranging sense of modernist machine aesthetics that takes in the scope of popular arts and culture, the historical contingency of Breer's background will also be taken into account. His initial training in the field of engineering and subsequent repudiation of it will be touched on along with his father's involvement at the forefront of the influential shift in modernist automobile engineering and design impelled by the edict *form follows function*. The development of the principles of industrial modernism will be raised, epitomized by the image of American Fordism – drawing on the technical rationality or scientific management ideals of Taylorism, and standardization of workflows, which underpin its modes of mass-production and the manufacture of goods at an unprecedented rate for unparalleled profit. The dynamic of the anti-kinetic-kineticism of Breer's animation-films will be foiled at various points by the systematization of chronophotography, or the scientific efficiency and micro-management manipulations pursued in early time-and-motion study films, widely used to validate the principles underpinning Fordist modernity.

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reproducibility: the status of expression
materialization of the subject
∞
the language of things
-
in relation to the aesthetic engineer

The way the modernist edict of *form follows function* becomes subverted by the 'instinctive materialism' of Breer's strategies and exploratory approach to film, will moreover be envisaged in relation to the Benjaminian figure of the aesthetic or 'optical engineer', in which Gilloch (2002, p.4) argues the 'object is subject to transformations and interventions which re-cognize its significance and actualize its potential'. To these ends, Breer's work will be viewed in the afterglow of the historical avant-garde's refunctionalization of technology, as both a confrontational probe and expressive rejection of the techno-scientific imaginary of industrial capitalism.

Recreation, 1956 is pivotal to a discussion of the self-reflexivity of production processes associated with film and photographic reproduction, which is rendered apparent by Breer's single-frame

aesthetic that is, moreover, repeatedly subject to violation, and accentuated by rapid jumpcuts, fleeting shots of irregularly pulsing and varied frame lengths and pithy moments of live-action. This paradoxical treatment of the apparatus will also be considered in relation to the auto-destructive machine in Breer's film *Homage to Tinguely's Homage to New York*, 1960, along with the mechanistic rhythms and dissolution of its structuration in the index-card film, *69*, 1968 and the minimal kinetic sculptures, known as *Floats*, 1966-7 for their unsystematic mode of gliding. The paradoxes of Breer's approach will be reconsidered, as noted, in light of the materialist perspective on art, in which as Osborne (1991, p.68) and others maintain, 'the subject and means of expression develop as mediations of wider social processes.'

Confronting the disjunctive expressiveness of the montages, and (post)aesthetic concerns which arise from disputes about form at the juncture of the everyday become part of an endeavor to situate the work beyond stylistic formalism. The artwork's refusal to espouse a modernist idealism will initially be probed in terms of the (post)modern assumptions, raised in Breer's interviews, on the ossification of high-art modernism. The initial recourse to *neoplastic* abstraction, for instance, in Breer's work becomes transformed by modes of experimentation, and its reconceptualization in which systems and patterns are set up, undergo permutations, and then are as abruptly disrupted or entirely abandoned. Conversely, the discussion will speculate on the aspirations within the form of Mondrian's *neoplasticism*, and Richter's *absolute animation* to potentially recover a sense within these earlier modernist approaches of art's aesthetic research, underpinned by its processual engagement and receptivity to the times.

Equally Schwitters' (post)aesthetic refusal of the avant-garde's anti-art status, or the increasingly imperative negation of its craft-basis, will be raised, along with the potential bearing of this schism on Breer's single-frame, collage aesthetic as part of its strategic assertion of animation-film-as-art. Tangential to this, the implications of Buchloh's (1982, p.43) interpretation of Schwitters mode of collage, *Merz*, will be considered, and in particular the thorny suggestion that the densely textured moment of cohesion wrought within its image enacts not an activation in the processes of seeing, but chiefly a 'melancholic contemplation' of the reification and commodification of everyday life.

Alighting from this polemic, Breer's work *Recreation* will, moreover, be set in a constellation with Benjamin's notion of melancholic contemplation and the potential criticality associated with the allegorical mode of reflection. It will be argued that proceeding from the mutability of things under the allegorist gaze, it is the mortification of the lively semblance from the pop-cultural commodity broken down by the action of cinematic collage to the striking moments of critical

illumination of the form, codes and doctrines of animation-film itself that is developed in Breer's unique utilization of animation-film.

How the image structure, wit and absurdity of Breer's cinematic-collages is rooted in a non-didactic *politics of representation* will be explored as processes of distanciation, in which, conversely, expressionistic elements that are generally correlated to the mythos of the visionary artist, or with the 'subjective authority of the artist'¹⁶ become challenged and refigured. Breer's artist's statements, for instance, largely decline such a privilege, and are considered propositions for the complex negotiation of the moving-image within this period, that does not seek to auratize film, or the figure of the artist, but to steer a course through the work's particular affective materiality and resistance to categorization, tackling the inevitable myth-making apparatus surrounding the public reception of artwork and artist(-filmmaker).

In this vein, it is not the aim of this thesis to fix an image of past, or of the subject which is overly reliant on the artist's stated intention as the sole key to questions of meaning, rather, this thesis will aim to be attentive to Benjamin's notion of the historical indexicality of the image-space opened by this conjuncture, as well as, the notion alluded to earlier, of the potentially critical afterlife of artworks.¹⁷ This galvanizing sense in the present, of a recognition and rescue of aspects blasted out of the continuum of the past, is enriched by the sense that for Benjamin (1999c, pp.470, 473), 'construction presupposes destruction'.

Particularly, it will be suggested that Breer's attitude, developed in light of the Benjaminian figure of the *aesthetic engineer*, along with his experimental approach to animation-film, encourages an active mode of viewing that refuses the prevailing enshrinement of previous methods and past works under the congealing weight of tradition.¹⁸ In this vein also Breer's work is not considered markedly formalistic, but primarily allegorical, at once critically and playfully 'destructive'. Concerning this characteristic, Benjamin (1978, p.302) also argues that 'some pass things down to posterity, by making them untouchable and thus conserving them, others pass on situations, by making them practicable and thus liquidating them. The latter are called the destructive.'

It is in this spirit that the thesis aims to recover a more acute sense of how these previously active aesthetic struggles are encountered within Breer's early animation-films, not as a mode of canonization, but as part of a contemporary enquiry into its own set of framing conditions.

¹⁶ (Foster et al., 2004, p.418)

¹⁷ Benjamin (1999c, pp.[N3,1] 462) writes, 'the historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says above all that they attain legibility only at a particular time. And indeed this acceding 'to legibility' constitutes a specific critical point of the movement in their inside.'

¹⁸ See also: Benjamin's (1973b, p.254) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'.

Likewise, the thesis will endeavor to reflect how in Breer's practice the claim of art is not made nominally, but rather the *work* in animation-film necessitates a potential transformation of the field of art.

Breer's practice will be regarded for how it tackles the dynamics of the subject in a dialogue with the form, materials and things, out of which the vernacular of the work is evinced, as the possible 'material subjectivity'¹⁹ of the artist becomes merely another element within the work's subject matter. Its apparent nonspecificity, at one level, raises questions of a shared sphere and of the democratization of modern culture, as well as the adverse consequences of the domination and dissemination of Americana. This will be discussed as part of a broader reflection of the experience of technology entrenched as an aspect of cultural form, as well as probed in terms of the problematic of the modern dissolution of the self, and of (social) subjectivation. It is, moreover, at the level of haptic aesthetics, by which movement, and affect, fundamentally refigures the dynamics of the subject that the input of theorists, such as, Massumi and Colebrook will also be drawn upon. However, the question of the subject in relation to the nexus of the individual becomes explicitly addressed, as will be discussed, in the film *Bang!* 1986, with its optic on the masculine imaginary. The way Breer has consistently refused a certain romantic aggrandizement of the artist, as the given and fixed subject of the work, becomes integral to the reading of *Bang!* in terms of an exploration of a subject-in-process, which indexes the effects of new technological shifts encompassing the expressive textures of other mediums, such as television and video-recording.

The film, likewise, will be explored for the way it uniquely expands on the new technological textures affiliated with semblance of movement, at the juncture between live-action and animation, the still and moving-image through its experimental, yet expressively critical distortion of the conventionalizing technique of rotoscoping, or re-tracing live-action. This paradigmatic procedure was developed in the field of animation to create a greater facade of natural movement, limiting the potential dissipations of the form's graphic and machinic dynamism, which conversely is not suppressed but proliferates in myriad ways throughout Breer's work. Breer's practice, as noted, will be shown to present an extensive refutation of the increasingly prevalent stylistic naturalism, crystalized by the Disney studio-system, and whose attainment involved the concealment of its processes and machinery. Closing the thesis with *Bang!* allows the questions of these threads, such as of the materiality of the subject and the persistent engagement with the aesthetic possibilities of form to be drawn circuitously together again. The work can be seen as an oblique return to the self-reflexivity of Breer's early work, succinctly expressed in *Recreation*.

¹⁹ (Osborne, 1991, p.63)

Appreciably then part of the problem of this thesis will be to grapple with the potentially broader reflection on form in relation to social experience, which remains elusive when the construal of such processes and the thresholds of perception are framed essentially as singular, formal experimentation. Likewise, this thesis will resist interpreting the work as a mode of authorially totalizing individuation, nor does it aim to contribute to the mythologization and romanticization of the figure of the artist with contentions that vastly transcend a circumspect scrutiny of the often contingent and contradictory concrete historical particulars that an individual subject traverses or embodies.

The 'instinctive materialism' engaged in Breer's practice, it will be argued, endeavors to actualize aspects of the cultural object of film, as it allegorizes the aspects of modern urban life, such as the sense of the machinic reification of the subject and the specter of objects on the cusp of hyperstimulated thingification within this period of intensified capitalism. Breer's approach gives expression to the difficulties but also at times distractedly exhilarating sense of what Benjamin characterizes as the jolt of the unintegrated immediacy of experience within modernity.

The challenging, neo-Dadaist and experimental hands-on disposition of Breer's work, which refuses to auratize film and earlier stylistic modernisms referenced, is illuminating when considering the current revival, and at times nostalgic tenor of the interest taken in modernism, structural, experimental and avant-garde film. Breer's work will also be explored for the ways in which it might cast a uniquely critical light on the more recent revival of interest in avant-garde film, in which the assertion of materiality and indexical values are often entwined with the 'supposition of the aura' (Didi-Huberman, 2005) in artist's film.

To this extent, the lament of the *post-medium* condition (Krauss, 2010b, p.1) which underscores the revival of outmoded, pre-cinematic technology, along with early cinematic techniques conveyed by the discourse surrounding Dean's site-specific installation, FILM, 2011 will be explored. The current framing of the division and reauratization of film against the backdrop of the prevalence of the digital will likewise be probed, drawing on Osborne's (2003) (2010b) notion of the 'transmedia' condition of the photographic. This framework informs the examination of Breer's film *Eyewash*, 1959.

Amidst the unpredictable flow and rapid countercurrents of *Eyewash* the dynamics of the cinematic apparatus and spatio-temporal limits of the visibility of the filmic image is staged as a paradoxical challenge to the linearity of the celluloid strip, (first broached in the single-frame aesthetic of *Recreation*). This work, however, delves further into the question of the (non-

narrative) readability of the diverse modes and materials which comprise the image-content, including e.g. non-objective sequences, snapshots, postcards, photographs of street signs and billboards, traced and handtinted photos and film, as well as handheld camerawork on the cusp between abstraction and representation. The aesthetic complexity of the photographic at play touches on the intensified mediatization of modern public space as it unravels the spatio-temporal and perceptual problem of the cinematic object.

In the context of the *neo-avant-garde*, Breer's work involves a unique and critical relation to film, which will be interrelated, for instance, to broader questions of representation, as well as the non-narrative modes, and problematic of readability in Rauschenberg's collage painting, *Rebus*, 1955. The materialization of the image, as will be elucidated in Breer's work, is caught between constructions on the flatbed picture-plane (Steinberg, 2002), the thwarted sequentiality of the filmstrip, and the 'space image'²⁰ of the projection screen. The resonance of Breer's collage films, such as, *Eyewash*, with a collage painting like, *Rebus*, will be explored for the ways in which, amid the antihierarchic tendency in the allover field, and the often interruptive, seemingly random order of its montage, the conventions of looking, perceptual limits and a new prominence of the viewer emerge within its optics.

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In this trajectory, Breer's work and its immanent investigations into the filmic form will be probed for the ways it extends the discursive formation of the field of animation into the realm of the moving-image and artists' film. The extent to which Breer's approach stretches previously held disciplinary limits, with a unique participation in and amplification of modern art's broader movement towards transdisciplinarity will be recaptured. This thesis will build on such a framework by aiming to recontextualize Breer's treatment of artistic forms and tropes more specifically in a dialogue with contemporary debates associated with the *neo-avant-garde*, in which 'visual conventions, habits of perception' become key, and as O'Doherty (1973, p.196) describes, part of an artist's material.

To this extent, works by *neo-avant-garde* artists, such as, Rauschenberg, will be touched on, along with Breer's work to elucidate how patterns, the habitual, conventional modes of viewing, and a sense of the shifts within 'perceptual history' are taken on decidedly transient diversions within images that are equally captivated by the potentially unruly plentitude, and paradoxical ambiguity of reality. The way that Breer's work plays with the conventions, and primacy of visuality, contesting the reification of form and bureaucratic organization of knowledge will be situated, as

²⁰ (Coté, 1962, p.18)

noted, more broadly in the context and debates of the *neo-avant-garde*, (extending the previous delimitation in Burford's (1999) monograph of a direct connection within certain films to prominent neo-avant-garde figures).

Equally, Breer's work will be considered for the way that it generates provocative contemporary resonances in light of the resurgence of the problematic of (post)aesthetics. Oriented by such a focus, this thesis contrasts, for instance, with Uroskie's (2012) recent contemporary contextualization of Breer's work in terms of the chronicling of film in performance events, and time-based installation. To this extent, it might be noted that, for instance, Uroskie's (2014, p.93) focus on the widely held breakthrough film of *Recreation*, 1956 is rooted in its significance as an early cinematic object that presents a 'quasi-sculptural situation' which is based on a recreation of the previously destroyed loop, *Images by Images I*, 1954. The lost loop is widely held to be the innovative original, elegant in its succinctness, and possibly the only work that employs entirely distinct imagery on every single frame.

This thesis by contrast construes the critical conceptual underpinning of Breer's single-frame aesthetic as less literally bound (by the disparity of frames on the filmstrip) and conceives it to be generated out of the disparity between the materiality and structure of celluloid, the apparatus and event of cinematic projection which is persuasively entangled with the problem of perception at play throughout Breer's practice. Given that the film was a recreation for the cinema screen, no longer without a beginning or end and endlessly looped, but clearly demarcated by a voiceover, it is worth pursuing a close reading of its integrity as a cinematic-collage. To do this, as mentioned, Benjamin will be drawn upon to speculate on the possible broader allegorical implications of the film's self-reflexivity, and regard of creation.²¹

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Breer's approach will be investigated, on the one hand, for its aesthetic engagement and mediation of previous modernisms, and while these disputes are reassessed for the dynamism of their impact, the conceptual valence or aesthetic logic is revived and disrupted in Breer's work as part of the *neo-avant-garde*. Breer's work will be framed as part of this early intersection, in which, Osborne (2002, p.32) argues, 'the function of questioning the nature of art' becomes an ontologically vital shift in art. Such a framework is also productive for thinking through Breer's early relation to animation-film, that operates at a certain level by '*stipulating* that some particular thing is 'art' that otherwise falls outside the established extension of the term'. While this is differentiated from the paradigmatic formalist modernism of 'questioning of the limits of a

²¹ See also: (Sitney, 1973, p.26)

medium', Breer's work does not entirely renounce, but reframes, as will be shown, the problematic of its supposed material objectivity through the interval offered by the (non-traditional medium) of the cinematic apparatus.

Within the current focus of this thesis, Breer's work and statements will be explored for the way that the limitations of the discipline and discourse of animation are critically tackled, as well as the exemplary way that it pursues an investigation of the importance of aesthetic frameworks, with an aesthetic investment that is prior to conceptualism (and the depreciation of the material instantiation of the work), and which has an interesting resonance with our *postconceptual* times. As part of an examination of pivotal moments within Breer's films, it will be, furthermore, argued that the customary disciplinary parameters of animation are not observed but intentionally breached, and moreover that the spirit or 'nature' of animation itself, as the illusion of life, is fundamentally questioned in a crucial encounter of the form and technique with the contemporary discourses of art.

The particular challenge presented by Breer's pre-pop cinematic *assemblages*, with the increasingly unstable status of the fragment, the droll allusions to the machine, reflexively employed kitsch mechanical toys, and its dis-orderly, discursive quality necessarily differs from the avant-garde. To this extent Breer's work will be considered for how it differentiates itself through a *neo-avant-garde* perspective, that is, likewise, uniquely and extensively constructed within the framework of the moving-image. These confrontations in the form and themes of Breer's artworks will be taken as simultaneously part of a resistance to traditional art-historical categorization, and as an expression not only of his valuation of the potential of animation-film as art, but also his appreciation that such technologies have a crucial function in the way art addresses modern experience.

The machinic assemblages, transformation, break down and interspersions of subjects and objects in the critical optic of technology in Breer's practice touches on the frontier of everyday life, the radically unproductive and discontinuous sphere of everydayness, with the potential to become counter-productive. That unregimented, latently residual sphere of the contradictions of lived experience and distracted participation whose moments of indeterminacy are posited as 'other' to (alienated) organized production, thingification, official politics, and the image brokered by dominant culture. The image-space generated in Breer's animations and its characterization of the present does not point wholly to the harnessing or semblance of life, but as importantly to a sphere of unactualized potential traversed by non-life in which materialization of forces that underpin conventions, and is prior to the normative grounding of life, might also be imagined and seized as part of the politics of experience.

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Robert Breer: A Background in the Mechanics of Motion
'Fashioned by Function' Modernism and Carl Breer's Chrysler 'Airflow' Motorcar
The Defunctionalization of Movement in Breer's Kinetic Frame:
The 1960s Sculptural 'Floats' & Film '69', 1968

As part of the question of the function of artist, critiques of authorship and shifts to the status of skill within art, Breer's background will be considered, as Roberts (2015, p.3) suggests, as part of the broader processes of 'general social technique' that is increasingly 'interdisciplinary and processual'. The artist, Robert Carlton Breer was born in Detroit, (b. September 30, 1926 – d. August 13, 2011). He spent his childhood in Grosse Pointe, a Detroit suburb in Michigan that has become synonymous in popular culture with affluence and for the pre-1940's baronial estates of the auto-industries founding families, e.g. the Fords, Dodges, Fishers (General Motors), and Briggs (auto-body suppliers). Reminiscing in 1973, Breer (Cummings, p.2) comments, '...talk to anybody, Detroit is a two-class town, blue collar and white collar. It's got the automobile industry and an awful big labour force and all the managing body live outside in the suburbs.' Regarding Grosse Pointe as infamous, Breer goes on to relate how the monolithic dominance of the automobile industry made it 'a place to flee as soon as possible' adding, 'of course, it's interesting now.' With a steady exodus of Detroit's population after the 1950s commencement of deindustrialization, along with the energy crisis of 1973, rising gas prices and competition from the more fuel-efficient cars of Germany and Japan, the boom-years for Motor City's industrial base would seem a distant past, its future uncertain.

Breer was the son of Barbara (née) Zeder and Carl Breer, chief of the Engineering and Research department, Chrysler Corporation (1925-1949) and part of Chrysler's innovative design team. Carl Breer was moreover a prolific inventor, who constructed a stereoscopic 3D camera and was also a filmmaking hobbyist with thousands of feet of 3D home-movie footage. This instance of Breer's (1973a, pp.69-70) father's prescience is irreverently touched upon in a letter to Jonas Mekas. In it he describes how his father invented a 3D or stereoscopic camera, convinced that the future of movies was in 3D. Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.7) reminisces, 'When we went down to the basement to look at home movies, we had to wear glasses and there was a long business of adjusting it so it was right and you couldn't tilt your head or it would distort.' In the letter Breer (1973a, p.70) adds, that '...the specter of my mother, flower in hand, coming forward into the darkened room with her legs missing and other similar truncated apparitions and my father's various unsuccessful efforts to cope with this *edge* problem' taught, rather, a broader aesthetic

lesson about framing and reflexivity or the ‘nature of art vs. reality’ in the aesthetic and technical pursuit of realism. Breer (p.70) concludes, ‘it has to do with revealing the artifices instead of concealing them. [...] The hat should be transparent and show the rabbit.’ Breer (Cummings, p.7) continues by describing how his father avidly filmed, amongst other things, ‘Kodak award-winning amateur studies[...]. He did all the things that you were supposed to do in the manual... very steadily composed.’ Breer (1973a, pp.69-70) notes he felt similarly about 3D home-movies; “it didn’t help. [...] Obviously, a perfected 3D, sound, smell, touch re-embodiment merely takes us back to point zero, the subject itself. It’s the teacup before the hologram of a teacup.’

Carl Breer’s most famous innovation, however, the 1934 Chrysler (Hicks, 2005, p.1) is claimed by brochures to be, ‘the first real motor car since the invention of the automobile’ which involved a



total re-evaluation of the automobile’s structural design that broke many of the traditional restraints of the motor vehicle industry.²² Under the maxim of ‘fashioned by function’, C. Breer (1995, p.159) determined to pioneer the principle of ‘streamlining’ in the ‘art *moderne* style’ within automobile design for the mass-market, and was instrumental in initiating new technological advancements.²³

Figure 1. Marey, *Triangular Prism Presenting One of its Bases to the Air of the Smoke-machine Equipped with 57 Channels*, 1901, (print from negative plate).

For the Chrysler *Airflow*, C. Breer consulted with Orville Wright (aeroplane co-inventor) testing models in a small wind tunnel (similar to Marey’s document of the *Triangular Prism*) before building the

²² Marey (Musée d’Orsay, 2006, p.1) chronophotographer, initiates aerodynamic studies in a wind tunnel, a technique that was developed further by 20th century aviation and automobile engineers.

²³ such as the integrated unibody space-frame construction, balanced weight distribution, automatic overdrive, and the one-piece curved glass windshield. See also: (Chrysler UAW, 2012, pp.1-2)

industry's first full-scale wind tunnel at its Research Center, 1927. The futuristic 1934 Chrysler *Airflow* sedan was the upshot, publicized for being Chrysler's (1934a, p.41) masterpiece, 'America's most modern motor car' and an experience in 'up-to-date motoring for modern-minded people.'

In the 1930's, as suggested, modernism was not only the purview of fine art or high culture but had become central to popular culture and mass-media. The narrative of the *Airflow* operates within a quintessentially modernist problematic, with modernist innovators, such as C. Breer, stimulating mass-production, while embracing, for instance, the human capacity for change, the attempt to reshape and improve the built environment, and appealing to the wisdom, as they saw it, of Mother Nature's designs in conjunction with scientific research and practical experimentation.



Figure 2. Chrysler Ad., 'Why Be So Radical?', The Saturday Evening Post, 1934.

The research-basis of the modernist approach with its ostensibly progressive vision, is likewise promoted within Chrysler's (1934b, p.35) advertisement scenarios: "The very people who say 'radical' before they get into an *Airflow* Chrysler are the ones who quickly say "What a sensible idea' after their first ride.'" While Chrysler's

(1934c, p.27) advert 'Nature's Authentic Streamlining' projects a futuristic, state-of-the-art attention to materials; 'the new *Airflow* Chrysler bids farewell to outworn habits and traditions. There is the spirit of tomorrow in its chromium-mounted seats'. It continues that the vehicle, 'gives a ride so smooth that any sort of road seems a perfect road [...] scientifically built to the laws of dynamic balance [...] to produce a gentle glide.'" This presents notable reverberations with the reconsideration of conventions in R. Breer's later artistic inventions, the kinetic sculptural *Floats* (Figure 4,7) which present a minimalist subversion of materials, but also of the specificity of such motion allied to modernist notions of progress.



Figure 3. Carl Breer, Chrysler *Airflow*, 1932, presents a model of the future of the automobile.

While the *Airflow* car was initially rejected for its appearance and a commercial flop at the height of the Great Depression, it has since been acclaimed for its ‘radical’ design, decades in advance of public taste. One automotive critic Neil (2007) notes in a list of ‘The 50 Worst Cars of All Time’ that it ‘antagonized Americans on some deep level, almost as if designed by Bolsheviks’, and particularly affronting was the raked ‘vee’ shaped windshield and front grille instead of the customary flat panel windows and square grille of the ubiquitous two-box models.²⁴ In fact, these latter vehicles, soon

outmoded, were so structurally inefficient that C. Breer had ascertained in the wind tunnel tests that they would be more effective driven backwards. Disappointed by the prejudices of the market, C. Breer (Daly, 2011, p.2) later objected, ‘Aerodynamics was gone with the wind. Who cared if cars were running backwards as before?’ And it would ironically be Robert Breer who took up this concern and created sculptural vehicles that roam aimlessly, in shapes and at a speed that is of a great and entirely excessive inefficiency.

Despite the divergence of aspirations, it is not entirely surprising to discover similar themes. Both lived lives in a perceptible dialectic with things, matter, and materials albeit in very different milieus. In the obituaries of Robert Breer that proliferated after his death it is implied that the sleek *Airflow* design inspired the minimal form of Breer’s kinetic *Floats*. However, it is argued here, that Breer more subtly subverts not only the form, but also the logic of his father’s prototype by his own inventive logic, which is turned, rather, towards a playful absurdity. Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.34) discusses the *discontinuity* of his films and suggests a more fundamental critique of progress, ‘But since that movement is toward oblivion, in my philosophy anyhow, it might as well be backward. It’s a delusion to think that you’re getting anywhere.’

²⁴ Image Source: (Nitro Mag, 2013, p.1)



Figure 4. Breer, *Floats*, 1966, (photo).

Robert Breer, (Moore, 1966) pictured with a collection of his self-propelling *Floats*, exposing one of the objects mechanism, 1966. Discussing the contingency of his background, Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.10) nevertheless states, ‘I think rebellion might be a necessary distance-taking to permit you to capitalize on the things that are already

there. [...] I had to back away from my old man and his long shadow to find myself [...]. But once I got further away I could compare my shadow with his and then the shadows were then basically the same thing.’

the single-frame mechanism: shuffled index-cards

Other iterations of Float-like objects crop up in his animated index-card films, such as, *69*, 1968 (Figure 6) with the question of the speed and self-reflexivity imparted by its visual rhythm within the single-frame film form invariably dealt with in a technically different manner, yet both are constructed out of what Breer (1974, p.35) describes as ‘time intervals and space changes’. Breer’s film *69* (Figure 5) is part of a return to his exploration of *neoplastic* hand-drawn imagery and stencils first explored in his *Form Phases IV*, 1954.

In a play of flatness and depth, hard-edged geometric shapes are set up spatially in *69* by utilizing the dynamics of the span of the frame and the frame-edge. The industrially-shaped objects revolve in and out of the frame-edge and skim across its surface punctuating the center, in strong repetitive rhythms, and in a manner suggestive of the relentless mechanics of heavy manufacturing, as well as, film’s own claw mechanism whose action and optical assault, however, is wittily offset, and catches against the sound of a metronomic busy signal, the telephonic tone of being put on hold.

The index-card animation of hand-drawn elements predominantly utilizes mechanical drawing tools, the straightedge ruler, stencils, spray-paint, industrial screentone textures. The pronounced pulsation of its rhythms is further condensed by the way that its objects and movements are constructed out of a composite of frames. Breer (Levine, 1973, p.13) utilizes a pulsating, flicker-

effect between color, lines, and positive and negative space to create the synthesis of its filmic image or what he has called the ‘recreated image’. Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.158) states that the interest in ‘mixing projected light’ and exploring the ways it operates differently from ‘mixing pigments’ began with *Form Phases IV*, 1954. In *69* this becomes explicitly apparent as the movements and forms that have been built up are periodically obliterated by a freeform counter cycle in which the index-cards are shuffled and color blocks, line, and motion become disconnected into constituent parts. Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.48) states of *69* that it is a filmic analysis of ‘frame by frame synthesis’.



Figure 5. Breer, *69*, 1968, (4.24min,16mm, 8 stills).

Its driving tempo is also interspersed with ‘soft’ fluid line drawings, some evocative of Oldenburg’s ‘soft sculptures’ but also reminiscent of Breer’s film *A Man and His Dog out for Air*, 1957. The lines, however, do not coalesce and roam about the extent of the frame’s surface but are rhythmically tracked and disperse before the taut minimally evoked crosshairs of a gun or a camera’s view-finder scanning the deep white space of the screen’s center point. Out of the cross hairs the winding lines disappear like plumes of smoke or the confetti of shifting shapes before any coherent semblance of activity becomes discerned.

The line, at one point, is evocative of a rotating Calder-esque mobile whose sculptural kinetics is motivated by natural phenomena e.g. the flow of air. The quality of the moving line, a mobile-like drawing in air, is described by Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.12), when discussing his own rarely seen sculptural works, called the *Bent Wire*, explaining that ‘it’s a long wire that just undulates and not in any regular way except it revolves around an invisible axis. When you revolve it slowly it does seem to undulate, although actually it’s a wire turning. When you see it in profile it looks like a wavy line and this was the way of solving the problem of kinetic drawing.’ In *69* Breer makes various allusions to forms of movement within kineticism by evoking ‘natural’ movement, the

hidden mechanical movement of the *Float* sculptures, as well as a sense of the rotating mechanisms within the apparatus of the film medium itself.



Figure 6. Breer, *69*, 1968, (4x6in index-card).

Likewise, all of these differently delineated aspects of motion in *69* are intercut with the monochromatically colored frames that flicker, and further complicate the flow of movement by its flattening staccato. The sound stops and, with its cessation a sense of release is conjured from the noise and build

up of the film's construction, complemented by a free-flowing soundless 'afterimage' of random fleeting occurrences of hard-edge geometric shapes and fluid lines. The sound like a motor starts up again. This is accompanied by instances of the *Floats* drawn on index-cards (Figure 6), which glide and float past each other at a busy intersection, in a seamless and orderly, almost futuristic fashion, but reminiscent of 1950s futurama, or the perfect synchronicity of a factory floor.

Yet, the noise is neither high-tech nor does it connote speediness, but is humorously reminiscent of an 'old fashioned' engine idly chugging at a standstill. With the new interjection of the previous bold rhythms reasserted, the fluid intersecting zone of 'tanks' begins to 'breakdown' into the disorder of its own trajectory, and becomes a flicker of jump-frames, sticking static frames, and a haltering reversal of freeze-frames. The mechanical whirl and pulsating rhythms of *69*, in many ways, presents the filmic counterpart to Rees' (2002, p.83) argument that 'Cars and movies grew in tandem. Like most machines of the nineteenth century, they apply the technology of intermittent motion, as did the sewing machine, the steam train and the machine gun.' But Breer's film *69* turns itself inside-out to take a cunning Pop shot at the manufactured aesthetics of cinema's factory of dreams.



Figure 7. Breer, *Floats*, 1966-7, (2 photodocuments).

The masked mechanization of the *Floats*²⁵ (Figure 7), despite their minimalist concern with materials and pared-down contours, have been described as figurative references to buoyant and gently drifting nautical markers, as well as the exhibition vehicles used in processions and parades. They have been likened, Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.6) recounts, to motorized molluscs, and as a quintessentially American absurdist gesture, resembling the motorization of the rocks of a Zen garden (when exhibited in the 1970's World Fair, Osaka). However, despite relating to his 'past fascination with automobiles and planes', the *Floats* are rarely elaborated in a direct connection with the popular art of the automobile.

Such works did release sculpture from the pedestal, but in this frenetic world of hyper-mediated speed, they still surprise with their tenaciously gradual pace, which paradoxically contributes to their constructedness. It is a gentle *détournement* that defunctionalizes the expressions of commodity culture and grapples through the medium of motion, with the difficulty of their close approximation to non-art objects (with other examples of the *Float* vehicles including a drifting wall, columns, and rumpled creeping rugs, Figure 7). But it does so, in a manner other than the declarative power of naming 'something art as an act of provocation' as Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.5) argues was initially done with readymades.

²⁵ Image Source: Left: (Moore, 1967), Breer, *Studio View*, 1967, including motorized *Column*, *Tank* and *Rug*. Right: (Breer, 2010) Breer, *Floats Slice Tank*, 1966, motorized sculptures approximately 14x24x48cm, painted metal, styrofoam, wheels and motor, other materials include: polystyrene, foam, plywood, and later fiberglass, various sizes.



Figure 8. Rauschenberg, *Linoleum*, 1966, (13min, document clip of performance, 3 stills).

A few of Breer's *Floats* feature in Rauschenberg's film of the performance piece, *Linoleum*, 1966.²⁶ Traced in white chalk by Rauschenberg one scuttles out of the confines of the film frame. Breer's ironic, aimlessly wandering *Floats*, are seen, Spector (1997, p.235) states, 'transgressing their limits – creating, perhaps, a visual metaphor for the liberating tendencies of Rauschenberg's theater.' Burford (1999, p.83) likewise, quotes critic Rose²⁷ in a press piece noting that, 'Breer's work transcends this limitation [of serial art] because it is neither programmed nor computerized. [...] Floats, or 'creepies' [have an] uncannily human, as opposed to mechanical, quality. Patterns, random configurations.'

It could be added that the way in which Breer's work heightens the perception of space is through its subtle, anti-kinetic changes, which are initially imperceptible, but evoke the temporal suddenness of distance. Distinctive instances become detected in the flow of slowly shifting reconfigurations of the space, which the *Floats* inhabit and activate. Time is serialized by the moments of elusive surprise in the alterations of space. Discussing the *Floats* in relation to the illusory motion of film, Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.45) notes: 'I am not particularly interested in demonstrating motion, as such, and have deliberately kept my pieces monolithic. There are no visible moving parts. Movement only takes place outside the piece, between it and the surrounding space and thus becomes part of the atmosphere, like light... These almost motionless floats occupy the same threshold I've crossed over a thousand times in making my animated films. It's a question of putting two and two together and getting five.' The kinetic processes at work in the minimal sculptures which are almost static or imperceptibly kinetic are inevitably set in contrast to the viewer's perception of movement and its intermittent breakdown. This is paralleled in the rapid-fire imagery of divergent frames within Breer's animated films, or his hand-cranked mutoscopes and flip-books of index-card imagery.

With such considerations Breer's work might be thought to connect with the discourse of

²⁶ Judson Dance Theatre, NOW Festival at the National Roller Rink, Washington D.C., 1966.

²⁷ N.Y. Magazine, Arts section, 08/06/1973.

movements like Minimalism which utilized serialization, not as described by Rose, but as part of the critique to shift focus from the object itself and to open up the space of art, reflecting back upon the architectural and institutional places in which art is contained. While Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.44) states that ‘the idea of making art objects that were restless was intriguing to me’ he continues by arguing that he ‘was trying to create a sort of gallery presence with them and didn’t want their activities reduced to anecdotal events.’



Figure 9. Oldenburg, *Profile Airflow*, 1969, (multiple wall-relief sculpture, 85.1x166.4cm).

The modernist juncture presented by the *Airflow* has further reverberations more generally within the Pop generation as is evident in the *Profile Airflow* by Oldenburg,

for instance, which is considered a pivotal work in Oldenburg’s investigations in soft-sculpture, and becomes refigured in the *Airflow [project]* more broadly as a containing space that is precursor to *The Store*. Oldenburg was interested in the implications of utilizing the *Airflow*, an icon of modernism, and a design rooted in industrial mass-production, which was refunctioned to raise questions about ‘style’ and its relation to artistic expression and his own process within an art of mass-produced multiples.²⁸

The juncture of C. Breer’s *Airflow* presents a streamlining watershed for design, intended to make affordable the luxury automobile, and its comfort, efficiency and economy. It was hailed by Chrysler (1934d, p.72) as a revolution in performance providing a ‘glorious sense of freedom at high speeds’ with the trademark of the *Airflow* being – The Floating Ride (Popular Mechanics, 1934, p.2A). While R. Breer may or may not have been stimulated by this juncture, his imperceptibly roaming ‘creepies’, nevertheless harbor a critique, and are not clearly allied with a forwards or backwards motion, but drift incrementally towards each other and the surroundings in an indeterminate and coincidental manner. Upon point of contact the *Floats* retreat in a way that detaches motion from the usual grid of alignments in the graph or the infrastructure of roads and rather isolates motion in relation to the wandering participant-viewer within the gallery space. Such spaces included the white-cube, but also courtyards and gardens, and, notably, the *Floats* were scaled up to six feet high for the Pepsi Cola pavilion, Universal Exhibition, Osaka, 1970.

From a macroscopic perspective the *Floats* expand into broader questions of direction in terms of the association of the automobile with ‘progress’ (1934d, p.72), or as Breer (Francis, 2011, p.8)

²⁸ Image Source: (Oldenburg, 1969)

exclaims more generally, as cited earlier, ‘it’s a delusion to think we are getting anywhere’, while at a bodily level, the *Floats* also alter one’s distracted perception of space over time. Against the sedate turbulence of the *Airflow*, the amusing quietism of Breer’s motorized ‘modernist’ *Floats* becomes even more sharply imbued with irony and the absurdist comedy of modernist dreams of high efficiency and speed that binds the automobile to the rhetoric of personal freedom, and escape.



Figure 10. Breer, *(Almost) Everything Goes!* 2011, (index-card sketch enlarged to 20m high banner for his retrospective at the BAL TIC).

While *(Almost) Everything Goes!*²⁹ has a colloquial familiarity that plays with the advertising urgency of the closing-down sale, e.g. ‘everything must go’, it also evokes a creative, economical, and even democratic enthusiasm for inventive thrift. It presents a

celebration and potential critique of the everyday that has been crucial to the avant-garde, neo-avant-garde, and early Pop moments in art. The image-phrase ‘everything goes!’ quickly indicates that virtually everything exhibited is either in motion or concerned with movement and its de-functionalization, as well as, principally the thresholds of its perception. Yet, the sketch also casually indicates Breer’s (Moore, 1980, p.10) own very seriously held aesthetic concerns that differentiates his approach from the abstraction of high modernism. The importance of cinematic collage as a ‘positive welcoming of expression’ is also differentiated from the later more reactionary, less aesthetically astute moment of ‘anything goes’ postmodernism; as Breer (Trainor, 1979, p.18) argues, ‘When I make these collage films I have a theory that everything goes, not anything, but everything’. And it is the nuances of this position within Breer’s cinematic assemblages that will be explored throughout the following sections.

²⁹ Image Source: (Lowes, 2011). Robert Breer Exhibition, 11 June -25th September 2011, BAL TIC Center for Contemporary Art.

CHAPTER 1

*Recapturing Constructive Movements:
Mondrian's Neoplasticism & Richter's Absolute Film
in Constellation with Breer's Filmic-image Form Phases IV, 1954*

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Abstraction's Horizons & the Imminent Problem of Inclusion

From 1949-1959 Breer lived in Paris³⁰ and was affiliated with the movement of *kineticism* at Galerie Denise René, launched in 1944 to promote early geometric painting (and its development, by Vasarély, into optical paintings). It was there, Breer notes that he began to practice the rigors of *neoplasticism* more intensively. However, he also discusses how during his early education at Stanford University (BA, 1949) abstraction had controversially become a stimulus. Breer gives a sense of his firsthand experience of the antagonisms that arose from the disputes between socialist realism that prevailed in the 1930s and the new potentially critical paradigms of abstract modernism that began to succeed in America in the 1940-50s.

These disputes are cursorily sketched here, drawing from *Modernism and Culture in the USA, 1930-1960*, in which Harris (1993) outlines the paradigm shift to the ostensibly 'autonomous' appearance associated with abstract art, and the transcendence or 'purity' of high modernism, from the image-content dealing with social and vernacular iconology. In America this latter collective and politicized artistic tendency is often associated with the espousal of US social realism, or 'capitalist-democratic realism' (p.13) by the Depression-era New Deal Federal Art Projects' (FAP), 1935-43 whose primary objective was the employment of artists and production of public art (murals, posters, paintings, sculpture etc.). The prevalent use of social realist pictorial codes was gradually contested for, amongst other things, its focus on domestic issues and its populism. Such work was expressly depreciated by modernist art-critics such as, Greenberg, Rose etc. as outmoded. And along with the broader Cold War cultural and ideological suppression of socialism, it became displaced in the 1950s by the individualizing alienations of US political liberalism.

'[W]e American's are the most advanced people on earth, if only because we are the most industrialized,' Greenberg (1986b, p.193) writes in 'The Situation at the Moment', 1948,

³⁰ Breer (Levine, 1973, p.2) went to Paris on a G.I. bill and signed up to go to one of its art schools, noting, 'people were still painting in the academies that have spider webs in them and they're still painting the nude as if Mondrian hadn't lived in Paris for fifteen or twenty years. So that the people I knew were working outside of them.'

continuing with a kind of triumphal pessimism, that the most ‘advanced’ American abstract art, likewise, is in the strongest position to face and give expression to this predicament: ‘Isolation, or rather the alienation that is its cause, is the truth – isolation, alienation, naked and revealed unto itself, is the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced. And the experience of this true reality is indispensable to any ambitious art.’ Despite a period from the mid to late 1940s of a proliferation of divergent styles and modes of attention, the eschewal of the representational also becomes strongly tied to the narrative of the ascendancy of ‘American style painting’ with its ‘inheritance’ and transposition of Parisian interwar Modernism. However, many of these same artists, famously e.g. Pollock and Rothko, had been affiliated with and supported by Federal Art Project schemes, and it is from this perspective that Harris (1993, p.37) aims to recapture a sense how the concerns of the 1930s become reconfigured in works of the 1950s, and yet goes some way to understanding, ‘why the idea and dream of an art *unconnected* to social and political realities became so appealing to artists who had previously been committed to the transformation of US society.’³¹

Such artists, Harris maintains, continued to respond strategically to the changing postwar climate, rebuffing wartime, then cold-war nationalism, and presented an outlook produced in a dynamic between the universal and individual subjectivity. Notwithstanding the triumphal pessimism of Greenberg’s tone, for some practitioners of American-style abstraction it was also imbued with the tragic,³² which Harris relates through Rothko’s writings to the particular climate in which the codes of pictorial ‘realism’ had become an aberration, subject to charges of anti-Americanism and fallaciously associated with Stalinism. As an exemplar raised against the associations of pictorial realism, ‘American-style’ abstraction had become distorted within the bellicose rhetoric and anti-Communist sentiment of the times, ‘despite the persistently anti-nationalist and anti-capitalist statements made by Pollock, Rothko and Newman’. (Harris, 1993, p.37) Instead of suppressing the socio-historical influence upon modernism’s aesthetics, one might for instance, also consider the complex and very different problematic highlighted by the ‘new realisms’ explored in the cubist and postcubist works of Léger and Mondrian. The interpretation of such practices and their sphere of influence was still very much in contention in the late 1940s. Breer’s (Beauvais, 2006, p.168) own illuminating experience of the tensions and suspicions of this period is given expression when he recounts that he was,

thrilled by formal arrangements – color, line. My socialist realist teachers in the Stanford Art Department had somehow organized a trip to San Francisco to see a Mondrian show

³¹ Harris (1993, p.52) suggests that public expression is smuggled in the work through the convention of the mural’s scale, and refigured by Abstract Expressionist work but still intimating a social function for art, or the possibility of a new kind of history painting in contrast to the usual interpretation of the move from easel painting to wall size canvases being related to the scale of American landscapes and gritty grandeur of their loft studio spaces.

³² (e.g. contrasted in Mondrian’s writings to the *non-tragic* dialectic presented by neoplastic artwork)

which blew me away and I immediately started painting abstractions. I was subsequently told by these same teachers that if I continued to paint abstractly they would not/could not continue to teach me.

One of these teachers, the Russian born Victor Arnautoff, a fresco mural painter who had worked as an assistant with Rivera, tried to dissuade him from abstraction during a three-hour meeting, with the undesired effect of piquing Breer's curiosity more resolutely. Eventually through the intercession of the department head, he was given a separate studio-space and left to his own devices. Nevertheless, Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.4) relates with disgust how Arnautoff's own career had later been nearly destroyed, culminating in a 1956 summons to appear before a subcommittee of The House Un-American Activities Committee over a political cartoon commenting on McCarthyism, entitled *DIX McSmear*, removed from the San Francisco Art Festival, 1955.

This encounter with passionate proponents of American socialist realism at Stanford during his formative years and Breer's emergence as an artist during the period of so-called *US political liberalism* undoubtedly had an effect on his practice. This might be perceived not so much in terms of Breer's lasting refusal to deal overtly with socio-political content in a realist manner as this mode had to a great extent fallen out of favour and its cultural currency decimated. But one might observe more deeply the persistent way in which his practice comes to problematize an overarching ideological adherence to form.

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Aesthetic Politics of Form & Question of Origins

Breer's characteristically unorthodox practice, that is entangled in the legacy of modernisms and the avant-garde, as will be touched on, can also be understood for the way it complicates the narrative of Modernism's 'apolitical' aesthetic autonomy, which verges on a hegemonic antipathy towards its cultural *others*, (mass-culture, kitsch, kitsch-art, and both populist and classicist antecedents). In such accounts high Modernism's putatively 'affirmative' abstraction is considered an extension rather than subversion of tradition.³³ Yet, for many of its proponents, modern abstraction must also be taken to reflect a consideration of the 'tragic' disequilibrium, (Mondrian, 1987i, p.136) or volatile instability in the conditions of a reality utterly transformed by new technologies, intensified mass-production, and the industrialized machinery of warfare. The

³³ (the implications and debates about the investigations of 'truth to materials' becomes rather a stringently received Greenbergian aesthetics)

desire for the recuperative possibility of art (e.g. Mondrian's controversial concern with the non-tragic possibilities opened by the moment of art) associated with its polemical search for the underlying principles of arts' expressive content, should be distinguished from, say, the studied neoclassical focus in abstract composition of the balance and hierarchies of form.

The reproach of purportedly apolitical, autonomous modernism is furthermore differentiated, for instance, by Bürger (1984) amongst others, from the criticality of the avant-gardes by ascribing to the latter a fundamentally socially consequent role in its critique of bourgeois culture, which is rooted in its reflexive criticality directed at Art itself.³⁴ New relations in the *work* of art, the legacy of the readymade, the use of systems and chance to critique subjective authorship, the fragmentation of spatio-temporal representation by montage etc. had all begun to subvert art's traditional categories and autonomy. Yet, when tightly bound to an oppositional political aesthetics, the historical avant-gardes are, despite these momentous shifts, typically lauded as a heroic failure.

Nevertheless, the non-negating, anti-classical approach within modern and avant-garde aesthetics, as espoused by Mondrian, Richter and Schwitters, is important for a consideration of the neo-avant-garde approach, which it is argued here, is also apparent in Breer's work. It should be signalled that between the poles of the avant-garde's anti-aesthetic negation and high modernism's apolitical asceticism, Breer sought a critical value, for instance, in his film *Form Phases IV*, 1954 and more overtly in the film *Recreation*, 1956. He does this by self-reflexively commingling aspects of modernist tropes, along with the utilization of a vernacular of non-art materials and technology, in a democracy of everyday and kitsch objects within his geometric films and subsequent cinematic assemblages.

The importance, for instance, of neo-avant-garde interdisciplinarity is touched upon when Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.7) describes the significance not only of a relation to the 'film context' but also later to the situation of art in New York. This was rooted in Breer's meeting and camaraderie with Klüver which developed during their involvement on Tinguely's *Homage to New York*, 1960 and led to Klüver acting as the key technical facilitator on Breer's *Floats* for the Pepsi Cola Pavilion, Universal Exhibition, Osaka, 1970. Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.7) recounts, 'Billy Klüver introduced me to all the pop artists. [...] It was mainly with Pontus (Hultén) and Billy (Klüver) that I met Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Warhol eventually, and all those people. And I felt connected

³⁴ Thomson (2006, p.60) in 'Modernism or Avant-garde?' suggests this became a more entrenched political refraction later, and signaled a distinction between progressive and reactionary strains within early 20th Century movements, typified by 'the modernist, who wishes to emancipate society through culture, and the avant-gardist, who wishes to destroy [bourgeois] culture in order to emancipate society'.

to them in a way I didn't feel with others. [...] they were all being very successful and me, I had nothing but films. So I wanted to be in the gallery situation. I wanted to have attention, serious art attention.'

Such an attitude during this period including the cooperative endeavor between artists, as well as technological specialists is principally unconcerned with the canonization of avant-garde 'firsts', key to the marketing of art's 'originality', and which to an extent structures Sitney's (2002) consideration of Breer in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, 1974. However, it is important to reflect that the journal *Film Culture* with which Sitney (2000a, p.1) was affiliated, was one of the few publications at the time, with its inception in 1955, that produced scholarship, which aimed to take experimental film seriously but which also aimed to establish a canon of key independent cinematic works.

Sitney's framework, outlined in *Film Culture*, can be seen at one level to operate within the broader art-historical periodization which is typically marked by the international hegemony of US art institutions and then to a large degree by US art itself. For artists, these debates tended to be framed as the displacement of the perceived artistic center from Paris, along with the imported cultural hegemony of European modernism and the heritage of abstraction within French painting. American artists had begun to contend with the strategies of the European avant-gardes on new ground, with a differing sense of contemporaneity in which the very 'subject' of abstraction comes to be reframed. These shifts are reflected in Breer's work as explored throughout this thesis.

Sitney's focus develops a conception of American avant-garde film genre, where such works were deemed largely to operate in a sphere of radical negation, or radical beyond the realm of conventional narrative or commercial cinema. Experimental filmmaking was characteristically framed in terms of its independent artisanal urgency and pitted at times explicitly, but oftentimes tacitly, against the goliath of Hollywood, both the ideological dominance of mainstream film and the industrial structure of its production and distribution networks. Sitney (1978, p.vii) expressively interprets avant-garde film as that which, 'reflects back upon another cinema, itself unnamed and undefined - against the darkness of which it shines'.

With this intent Sitney develops a fairly stringent emphasis upon film form in which to situate and explore Breer's work. While Breer's work should be differentiated from the conventions of live-action narratives, this should also include the animation industry, oriented by a pre-scripted and storyboarded narrativity, as well as the simulation of primarily naturalistic, albeit exaggerated, movements. Divisions of labor are commonplace within commercial production, with tasks

typically divided to allow for future specialization within a studio setting of writers, directors, storyboard and layout artists, primary to assistant animators and inbetweeners, character designers, background artists, editors etc. This undoubtedly produces a particular trajectory that the *poetics* of animation in works by artists such as Breer not only avoid but also explicitly reject. In fact, I would argue that the innovative work and extent of the poetic-investigative focus in Breer's practice is unlikely to have arisen within the disciplinary context of an animation studio and its studies.

On process, Breer (1974, p.35) states, "The animation technique happens to suit my purposes, but as a former painter, I am trained to challenge conventions rather than accept them. Those I have accepted have to do with attitudes to the material itself". Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) nonetheless consistently attempts to return from questions of the role and thresholds of discourses and their development within the arts, to questions of perception and especially to focus upon immediate and accumulated experience within artistic process. "The only thing I've carried directly from my painting days is a practical discipline, which I have observed also in other artists who have transformed to films: that of working alone, at the artisan level. I almost *have* to work that way, and that's why I've had to invent my own short-cuts to making animated films'. In contradistinction to the constrictions necessary for the canonization of avant-garde film, Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.39) argues for a discourse in art with a broader relevance to comprehend the aesthetic implications of animation film,

I think it's fatuous to set yourself up as a pioneer and point at yourself narcissistically and assume everybody's going to congratulate you. It's a self-serving attention-getting process that doesn't guarantee good art. You just look around, see what nobody else has done, and do it. In itself that's not something to be appreciated. [...] 'There's a context for what you do. Ideas float in the air like flu, and a lot of people get them at the same time. The reason for doing something new is the simple excitement of getting new life out of an old form. And that's enough of a reason.

The way Breer frames his work in connection to the past, rather than as break with it, can be encompassed by Bürger's (1984, p.63) contention that, 'through the avant-garde movements, the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate.' Osborne (2013, p.21) likewise argues more recently that, 'it is this neo-avant-garde art-historical consciousness that is most directly challenged by the sheer diversity of forms of internationally exhibited work produced since 1989 – in fact, since the 1960s.'

Equally, for art historians and theorists, such as Smith (2008), it becomes paramount to find a framework with the capacity to deal critically with the symptoms of what has been called

postmodernism and the sheer multiplicity of co-existent ‘modernities’ opened during this phase of globalization. Concerning art that makes claims on the present, i.e. ‘contemporary art’, Osborne (2013, p.163) continues that the question of characterizing the condition of contemporaneity invariably becomes enmeshed with a reflexive sense that the space of art is globally transnational, while at the same time linked to the evocation of art’s historicity, located, for instance, in the specificity of how the *archaeology of the present* is disclosed by art.

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Modernism in Question: Breer’s Neo-avant-garde Perspective ?

Often asked to consider his influences Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.164) responds, ‘... there are many people who influenced me and some I acknowledge and some I don’t...’ With his *Form Phases* series, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.43) explains in an interview that, ‘the first films were working out painting problems.’ Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.3) reflects elsewhere,

I got to know Hans Richter eventually and when I saw his first film that was very important for me because that was like seeing Mondrian, realizing that you can take painting and put it into film. [...] I first made a flipbook from my paintings. I didn’t know anything about movement and I hadn’t seen Richter at this point I think. [...] And I was mainly interested in the possibility of demonstrating the denoting of plastic ideas with a book. And then of course, like Hans Richter, I realized “well this is insufficient, I have to make a film.” And that opened a can of worms that was incredible.

It is likely that by the work *Form Phases IV*, 1954 Breer had seen Richter’s, *Rhythmus 21*, 1921, an extension of abstract ‘cinematic drawings’ on lengthy scrolls of paper, conceived with Eggeling. Breer’s investigation across the *Form Phases* series, transposes the problems of painting into the moving-image, initially by the use of the flipbook and slide-projector technology.³⁵ Breer (Levine, 1973, p.4) discusses this as part of his examination of the process, rather than, ‘any fixed composition’ or ‘end product’. The conventions of one medium are transposed with an impact that questions in a transformative manner the conditions of another medium. As Breer (p.5) continues, ‘I was using the convention of the canvas, as a given situation, and then sneaking in elements which normally you don’t find in the canvas.’

Elsewhere, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.42) maintains, ‘And that’s where I consider the *threshold* of what I know about a given medium and what happens when I violate that *threshold* at the moment I consider I am doing something worth pursuing. [...] It’s probably an old idea

³⁵ (Macdonald, 1992, p.19)

about avant-garde, you know, about breaking ground and about defining the limits of something by breaking those limits all the time. I consider limits very important, if only to serve as a basis for rupturing, you know?’ Of significant interest here is the sense in which the problematics of painting, or *not-painting* through new technologies, becomes critically mediated, marking the beginnings of a re-interpretation of traditional categories and their relations that would impact productively upon the hegemony of the notion of the ‘medium’ itself, as work encompasses, appropriates, translates and invariably transforms not only across a number of fields but also shifts the very grounds of such categories.

A gradual acquaintance with and knowledge of ‘absolute’ painting and animations, cubist cinema, and experimental films, such as, Richter’s *Rhythmus 21*, 1921, and Léger and Dudley Murphy’s, *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924 are part of an eclectic range of percolating influences in the development of Breer’s practice. Yet, more weight must also be given to the way Breer differentiates his work from neoplasticism and absolute animation, and deconstructs the film medium from the technical perspective of animation, its single frame basis, but also equally by his utilization and re-construction of the potential of montage editing in relation to the implications of the structure and plasticity of the medium.

Before discussing particular works by Breer in painting and film, it is important to briefly discuss some of the attendant problems that arise when situating Breer’s work within Sitney’s (2002, p.273) nascent canon of avant-garde film studies, particularly considering that the contemporaneous discourses within art,³⁶ for Breer, have until recently remained somewhat obscured by the limits of such a canonization. Towards these ends, Sitney (p.275) draws upon an unpublished interview in which Breer is asked to consider his work within the European perspective (in relation to dada and absolute film), presumably for the chapter titled as such, ‘The Graphic Cinema: European Perspectives’. At which point Breer promptly attempts to broaden the confines of this focus, responding that, ‘It’s true that my films had their roots in European experimentation of the ‘Twenties’ but then goes on to relate and differentiate his work from aspects of the American painting scene, setting it forth within a contemporary field of concerns and debates:

The Abstract Expressionists, and so forth, were working in a sort of anti-conventional way, trying direct expression, while I was happy working out of conventions. I like the idea of limitations which you break all the time. The limitations have to be there, if they’re self-imposed or if they come through some kind of historical inheritance, as mine are...

³⁶ e.g. the aesthetic re-engagement with subject matter of (pre-pop) assemblages, as well as, the expanded sense of film and performance, kinetic sculpture etc. with which Breer engages.

Sitney (2002, p.276) is then at pains to argue with Breer's stance on conventions, 'naturally the notion of the *threshold* is more vital to Breer's aesthetic than that of *conventions*. Conventions are, in fact, a means for him to come upon a threshold more immediately.' Breer's attention to the shifts in artistic debates about where and how the urgency in form is traced becomes inadvertently downplayed by such a focus. The significance of the *threshold* within the perceptual field of modern abstraction and its aesthetic means is, in film, given precedence over the material impact of interdisciplinary processes that invariably complicate categories and structural concepts. To emphasize the directness of Breer's method would seem to reinforce the notion of the 'anti-conventional' in terms of an expressive originality important for the canon of avant-garde filmmakers in *Visionary Film: The American Avant-garde 1943-2000*.

Sitney's concern in framing Breer in this manner would seem to echo aspects of Greenberg's (1982, p.8) contention in 'Modernist Painting', which uses as an example Mondrian's grids for being 'too convention-bound' continuing, 'the more closely and essentially the norms of a discipline become defined the less apt they are to permit liberties... the essential norms or conventions of painting are also the limiting conditions with which a marked-up surface must comply in order to be experienced as a picture. Modernism has found that these limiting conditions can be pushed back indefinitely before a picture stops being a picture and turns into an arbitrary object; but it has also found that the further back these limits are pushed the more explicitly they have to be observed.'³⁷ Undoubtedly this balance is complex, but as Harris (1993, p.60) discerns of this broadly familiar argument, artwork and processes become objectified and the search for absolute, or universal expressions ossified, in a manner that underestimates or dismisses the conceptual intentions and underpinnings of the artist. This is apparent, for instance, when Greenberg (1982, p.9) concludes his argument on 'Modernist Painting' asserting, 'the self-criticism of Modernist art has never been carried on in anything but a spontaneous and subliminal way. It has been altogether a question of practice, immanent to practice never a topic of theory.'

The constraint of a focus that prioritizes spontaneity and direct expression has the tendency to isolate Breer from the active international debates of his times about art practice 'generating a set of conditions' (Smithson, 1996, p.104). This is conceived of as proliferating new conditions in an unpredictable way, as North (2013, p.236) argues, contributing not to the reinforced delineation of boundaries, but to the shifting status of cultural objects. The 1950s situation is resurgent with complex questions of national identity and its fictions, as well as, the fictions of individualism, the orthodoxies of self-expression, existential subjectivism, artistic authorship, authenticity, as well as, the psychoanalytic and social subject that had begun to trouble artists in America, some

³⁷ this exposes a difficulty in reconciling Duchamp's conceptual and critical leap formulated *with* the readymade.

of whom had recently immigrated. The way Breer welcomes but situates 'direct expression' in relation to art's historicity becomes significant. It is argued, moreover, that Breer is likewise evoking a neo-avant-garde sensibility, which as Wood (2004, p.272) notes, was not necessarily refuting the late 1940s, and early 1950s achievements of Pollock and Rothko *per se*, but was nevertheless raising a counterstroke to Abstract Expressionism, 'particularly to the routinisation of expression that was the fate of its second generation.' In this manner an increasingly conceptual relation and critique of methods and conventions becomes significant for the neo-avant-garde.

Furthermore, following O'Doherty's (1973, p.196) consideration of Rauschenberg's work, aspects of which come to chime with Breer's approach, one might argue that the *process* of traversing the threshold of visual conventions is integral to the work's momentary illumination and interruption of the habits of perception, which together become the very material of such artists. Sitney does not go on to extricate the *threshold* of aesthetic experience from how modes of perception, ways of looking, and technical mediation are rooted in the *conventions* of form, (such an elucidation, it may have been felt, runs the risk of obscuring such works by a kind of formalism.)

It could be argued, that to extricate an engagement with thresholds from conventions, as Sitney proposed, would undermine precisely what is vital and potentially challenging in the *process* of Breer's work and its mediation of images and objects. Breer's approach destabilizes, however ephemerally, not only the common perceptual thresholds e.g. of movement, but also the traditional prioritization of certain mediums and categories in art and significantly between art and life. The objects and geometric forms utilized in Breer's work invariably probe their conventional functions as part of a confrontation in which, as Solomon (1977, p.23) asserts (e.g. of Rauschenberg), their presence at times has no clearly intended response, and would seem to 'answer that they are simply themselves, facts offered to us without prejudice' while at other times, they are poised to delve into the possibilities and limits of their strange new appositeness in contexts that are likewise defamiliarized and disconnected.

In the following *Arcades* passage, Benjamin (1999c, p.856) conveys how central the problematic of *experience* is to the activity and sphere of thresholds, firstly proposing a few examples, such as the act of 'falling asleep', and 'the ebb and flow of conversation'. Benjamin goes on to consider the centrality of ceremonial and architectural gateways that emblematically suggest the significance of thresholds but merely represent the maintenance of the boundaries of power.

Threshold and boundary must be very carefully distinguished. The *Schwelle* <threshold> is a *zone*. And indeed a zone of transition. Transformation, passage, flight are in the word

schwellen, <swell>, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses. On the other hand, it is necessary to keep in mind the immediate tectonic framework that has brought the word to its current meaning. We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. [M°, 26. First Sketches]

It is important to consider how Breer's interest in the breach of conventional boundaries – of the once starkly delineated disciplines within fine art itself, such as painting, sculpture, photography, as well as, between the arts and mass-media, such as, live-action (narrative) cinema, and industrial cartoons, which become points of reference or are worked against within his practice – but which becomes inextricably bound in a relation to threshold experiences.

The role of aesthetics in Breer's work, its theoretical excess, its origins in sense perception, the orchestration of feeling³⁸ and its position within the domain or experience of art, are engaged in ways that utilize an awareness of, but are resistant to, the edicts of categorial reification, which are taken up with an irreverent agency, and a defiant *joie de vivre*. Speaking with Sitney, one could argue, that Breer's praxis broaches categories and engages with the *thresholds* of movement and its perception, playing across (absolute/geometric) abstraction and, what Breer (1973a, p.69) has called in a published letter to Mekas, 'literary conventions.'³⁹ The importance of reflecting upon the everyday tactility of knowing and upon habitual knowledge in a manner that is beyond imitation is an important framework in which to consider Breer's work, which instigates new approaches through experimentation. This is made possible by the scope of animation beyond empirical (observable) reality and by the utilization of mechanical reproduction in terms of its possibilities for 'creation'. Breer's perspective of a detailed investigation into form encompasses categories, structural concepts (single-frame aesthetics) and the incorporation of conceptual frameworks, such as, chance (within the frame of collage, and between frames in montage).

Breer's consideration of 'literary conventions' within his practice is not conceivable in a conventionally 'literary' manner, rather this threshold could be reaffirmed as being on the cusp of abstraction's lyrical or figurative dis-associations, and dynamized in terms of the perception of the domain between the still and moving-image in his films, flipbooks, mutoscopes etc., as Breer (Coté, 1962, p.19) proclaims,

The new imagery I speak of simultaneously appeals to all known and unknown levels of awareness, using the full range of stimuli from primary colors through pictograms to the written and spoken word. The nature of movie film permits the combination in concentrated form of great quantities of diverse materials and interpretations. [...] My

³⁸ See following section and discussion of Richter, pp. 61, 63, 67.

³⁹ The 'literary' can also be linked to art criticisms (e.g. by Fried) of Pop art and Minimalism which harness 'external' references and associations over the self-referential boundaries of traditional art. (Frascina, 1993, p.91).

films, if nothing else, are formal: they are concerned with *overall* form. There are some conventions normal to most films which don't apply in mine, and I've had to forcibly tell the audience that it shouldn't expect the normal notions of continuity. I'm very much concerned with a new kind of continuity; even if it's anti-continuity, it still has a form.

As indicated, encounters with thresholds coalesce for Breer at the level of practice through a degree of self-reflexivity whereby e.g. 'the accident' is intricately bound in a feedback nexus with the objects of intention and fortuitously reinscribed as it comes to matter by directly exposing the way it both exceeds convention or the perceived limitations of the situation and offers up other formal possibilities.

The 'Structuration without Structure' of Breer's Experimental Films



Figure 11. Breer, *Form Phases IV*, 1954, (4min, 16mm, 2 stills).

Reiterating Barthes, Eagleton (1996, p.120) discerns succinctly that the text, 'is less a *structure* than an open-ended process of *structuration*',⁴⁰ which includes questions of origin and points to the intertextual network and interstices of cultural discourse, but is a process consummated by the figure of the reader and in this way criticism becomes a vital aspect of mobilizing the text. The new temporality of this *writerly text* is generated in a dynamic with the heterogeneous *now* of the participant-reader, that conceivably involves the artist amongst other figures, such as, the viewer, who is engaged not in the text's consumption but in the practice of its re-reading (and critically interpretive act of re-writing) which yields the text, as Barthes (1974, p.16) suggests, not as a

⁴⁰ Weber's (1976, p.937) deconstructive conclusion is likewise important that, 'if Structuralism, and above all, Saussure, will have demonstrated anything in their course (*Cours*), it is that "one can neither describe" anything "nor fix norms of usage" except by assuming a single, fixed point-of-view, which, however, is in a constant "state" of motion that we can never entirely arrest.'

thing-in-itself, ‘not the *real* text, but a plural text,’ in dispersal across a field of differences.

This is also correlated with a broader embrace, that takes in the iterations of the body itself, as Barthes (1974, p.5) contends, ‘the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages [...] The writerly is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, *structuration without structure*.’

A sense of how Breer grapples with the shifting contradictions of the period is expressed in another interview in which Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.10) discusses his approach within painting, noting that his work invariably came to be seen less sympathetically as being at the ‘soft-edge’ of abstraction. The new aesthetic sphere of influence of the American Abstract Expressionists⁴¹ was initially associated with *tachisme*’s lyrical abstraction, prominent in Europe, and pejoratively judged by the more orthodox ‘hard-edge’ aesthetes at Galerie Denise René, whose defensive championing of geometric abstraction became more entrenched. Eventually embracing his own invariably unorthodox sensibility within painting, Breer reframes this tendency stating, ‘somehow I tried to do something with my hard-edge geometry that would seem more American to me.’

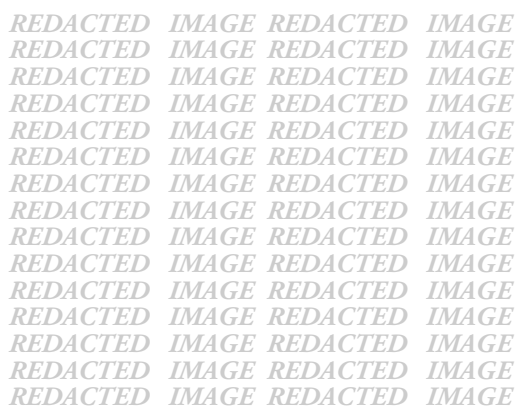


Figure 12. Breer, *Form Phases IV*, 1954.

I would argue that this divergent sensibility surfaces in Breer’s early work, and is evident in the film *Form Phases IV*, 1954. Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.17) recollects the situation at Galerie Denise René, ‘Now I felt I was working my way out of the very rigid notions that a lot of these people had. [...] I became disenchanted by some of their

orthodoxies. I couldn’t believe all this crap about avoiding configuration. It seemed to me strangely unnecessary. Some of the absolutism I couldn’t buy and one way out was kinetics.’ Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.159) describes elsewhere how his paintings came to draw upon ‘American and French conventions and was mostly ignored’ which combined with the positive attention his films were garnering internationally at cinémathèques in the tradition of dada’s

⁴¹ Associated with the influences of the ‘action painting’ of Pollock, and the ‘color field paintings’ of Rothko etc.

abstract films, encouraged him to focus his strengths and prioritize filmmaking, because in painting he was heading ‘toward a kind of expressionism and yet another orthodoxy.’ The consequences for Breer of such confining attitudes, along with his deepening focus upon filmmaking, which (despite conceiving of it in a relation to kinetics) was still not recognized as a ‘serious medium’ (Obrist, 2001, p.4) led to his split from the gallery, and return in 1959 to America.

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Another consequence of this situation is its influence upon Breer’s own attitude to form, his later attested ‘aversion to purely abstract films’ (Macdonald, 1992, p.19), and the anarchism and humor of his approach is evident even in his earliest works, which would have made it difficult to adhere to the more dogmatic ideologies and orthodoxies of form then established. Breer’s (Macdonald, 1992, p.27) emulation of a position of ‘indifference’ here suggests the possibility of an ‘art-for-art sake populism’ perhaps,

I had conventional liberal views – I still have them I guess, which *are* pretty cool on capitalism. I’m very antiauthoritarian [...] I’m always a little embarrassed and suspicious of myself when I do polemical projects. [...] I wouldn’t trade on easy political emotion. A really political person gets off on relationships to large social movements. That’s not my thing, and yet I feel that at times the elitism of Pure Art needs to be questioned too, and put in its place.

Following Roberts’ (2007, pp.2, 3), ‘Avant-gardes After Avant-gardism’ and its critique against the dominant narrative of the avant-garde’s historical failure, the aim here is to foreground in Breer’s work how the ‘concept of the avant-garde is actually given work to do, rather than revisited as a style’, where, for instance, relations are foregrounded to the strategies of the avant-garde, such as, ‘montage, simultaneity, the critique of the author, the readymade’. In the postwar context of a revival of individual liberalism (allied with the ideology of liberal capitalism) particularly in America, Roberts (2007, p.4) continues that the context becomes dominated by both the museum and mass-media, and the promise of art’s difference or its moment of resistance develops in a space where ‘the immanent logic of the artist’s relationship to tradition and the social world is practiced’.

It is important to reiterate today, when the moving-image has become a given within the sphere of art, that Breer’s practice of working extensively with animation techniques, the deployment of disorderly or seemingly flippant humor and evocation of early cartoons, would have still presented a challenge to the purported postwar *plurality* of the artworld, especially with regards to

the institutional marginalization of film. This situation in which Breer was a pioneer in the mid 1950s, is now widely recouped by artists today. Aspects of these fine art traditions, mass-media, the everyday, and for instance, the extension of institutional critique to non-art disciplines (new technologies, science, criminology, etc.) are nowadays all potentially explored in an effort to displace, at some level, habitual orientations, or to make visible aspects of the practical 'relations of recognition in late-capitalist society'.⁴² (Fraser, 1998, p.145)

By calling the viewer's spatial and logico-temporal tenets into question, Ziarek (2004, pp.120,123) suggests this brings about a sense of the underlying structural and formal determinations in a 'relationality, in terms of power.' The sphere of art begins to perform as a 'radical *otherwise* to power' and through its reverberations presents the transformative possibilities affecting 'the power-bound space of social relations'. Ziarek, draws here upon Adorno's (1997, p.255) passage on the importance of art's aesthetic capacity to transcend aspects of empirical (observable) reality, which nevertheless succeeds by concretizing its relation to what it purportedly transcends,

If in art formal characteristics are not facily interpretable in political terms, everything formal in art nevertheless has substantive implications and they extend into politics. [...] Whether art becomes socially irrelevant – empty play and decoration of social bustle – depends on the extent to which its constructions and montages are simultaneously de-montages, destroying while receiving the elements of reality and shaping them freely as something other.

This can also be considered within a temporal framework, where the refiguration of the *now* is brought forth through the problems of a work's form, its *structuration* and its historicity - a relation to external reality – in which, as Adorno (1997, p.301) notes when discussing the immanent processual dynamic of origins, 'its likeness to its origins is thrown into relief by what it becomes'.⁴³

Note that central to the argument here is also differentiating Breer's reflexive, neo-avant-garde relations from art's recent form of postmodernism and generalized *postconceptual* condition, in which, unlike with Breer's work, there is scant acknowledgement or recognition of aesthetic inheritances. Under the sign of the readymade and postconceptualism, an artist's relationship to tradition becomes perhaps less necessary and less likely to be worked through and congeals into

⁴² Fraser (1998, pp.143-44), furthermore, frames relations of the 'symbolic' order, heterosexism, gender, racism in terms of their effects within the exploitation of a capitalist economy arguing that 'injustices of misrecognition are just as material as injustices of maldistribution'.

⁴³ Adorno (1997, p.7) argues the subjective aspect in artworks is entwined in a creative and socially mediated process, however this becomes 'a cessation, a suspended moment of the process' and is disremembered as the congealed objective relations of form. Art's projected liberation or semblance of autonomy, Adorno reflects likewise, can also become congealed in art's subjective emancipation from the heteronomous determinations of the social collective.

equivalences – yet another reference among numerous pop-cultural references.

These shifts in engagement in relation to the iconography of abstraction are perceptively discerned in Klee's diary comments of 1915. Reflecting upon the growing impact of war, he describes this moment of modern abstraction as presenting a *cold romanticism*. He reflects, furthermore, that art unprecedentedly refuses to overwhelm the onlooker with the nostalgic solace of the past or the pathos of its loss, by recognizing instead the ephemerality and fragmented representation of its truths. Klee (1964, p.313) writes, 'In the great pit of forms, lie broken fragments to some of which we still cling. They offer the material for abstraction. A junkyard of unauthentic elements, destined to form impure crystals. That is what today is like.' The cool or *cold romanticism* of this perspective on modernity, that bears the impurities out of which new worlds are wrought, has resonance with aspects of the later 1950s 'aesthetics of indifference' (Roth) attributed to Duchamp's influence on Cage, that came to fruition during Breer's era.

Rather than the ostensible *anti-aesthetic* stance dominant in the avant-garde, and later in the conceptual 'filter of indifference', (Roth, 1998, p.44) a *cool romanticism*, rooted in *structuration* and materiality, could be said to characterize Breer's particular shift from the rigors and 'purism' of abstract painting. The impure crystal formations within Breer's work are apparent in the pronounced shifts of his early relation to *neoplastic* abstraction, which were intensified and expanded by a transition from painting to grappling with the representational challenges presented by the moving-image. Such shifts are apparent in the way Breer acknowledges the historicity of the 1920s absolute films, as evinced in his first film series, *Form Phases I-IV*, 1952-1954, as well as the subsequent cinematic collage *Recreation*, 1956 which are differently bound by a certain delight taken in the 'great pit of forms', broken fragments found in the morass of the abstract junkyard.

*On the Productive Incompatibilities of Pictorial & Filmic Space*⁴⁴
The Dynamics & Destabilization of 'Absolute Formal Values'

Discussing his approach to film, Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) comments that he 'backed into' cinema and the problems of movement from the disciplinary standpoint of an abstract painter concerned primarily with geometric forms and the compositional subtleties of ostensibly 'static forms' in terms of the self-reflexive use of post-cubist strategies in the studies of space, shape and color. Despite the engagement with what Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) quipped were 'cubist tricks', such as, the phenomena of 'red advancing and blue receding'⁴⁵ Breer had begun to introduce into his work, a 'dynamic element which showed that [he] was not entirely at home within the strict limits of neoplasticism'. Nor was Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) convinced by its reductive ideal of attaining 'pure sensation', when he notes, for instance, that red disperses into absolute red, or when, as with Mondrian, he comments that, 'the final absolute is verticals and horizontals'. The imaging dynamics of what Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.18) calls 'cubist tricks' can be understood to encompass the analysis of an image's structure, pictorial space, tonal contrasts, expressive oppositions, and include, 'figure/ground reversals, intersections, overlappings' which are utilized confidently in his abstract paintings but more complexly in his films like *Form Phases IV*, 1954.

How the filmic approaches are distinctively underpinned in Richter's *Rythmus 21*, 1921 and Breer's *Form Phases IV* will be discussed after a reconsideration of *neoplasticism*. While Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) argues more generally that the 'concentration, awareness, and even a heightened use of the picture plane' is 'brought into film, from the neoplastic disciplines of



Mondrian' this connection, the contestations and possibilities of such a trajectory are made uniquely manifest in Breer's film-work.

Figure 13. Breer, *Untitled*, 1949-50, (oil on canvas, 65x81cm).

The differing approach to abstraction is apparent at every level of the composition, from the images selected here of Breer and

Mondrian's neoplastic paintings, in the hues of the color palette selected, the tonality of their

⁴⁴ 'Coté: Are you not trying to say that cinematic form and abstract painting are compatible?

Breer: No, I think they are *in*compatible, at least in my own work.' (Coté, 1962, p.18)

⁴⁵ (Levine, 1973, p.3)

application, to the handling of the simultaneity and totality of the grid-like surface. Mondrian's *Tableau I* (Figure 14)⁴⁶ is exemplary of a nonreferential, deductive structure, which deftly dismisses symmetrical equilibrium, and presents its solution through the perceptual restructuring of conventional binaries. This is exemplified by the hierarchies of figure-ground relationships, a focus upon the central motif and secondary treatment of the frame, as well as, a shifting emphasis between the line as mark or delineation of the volume and the plane or more graphic color-shapes, which together with their attendant debates were once perceived as urgent problems within art.

Equally, while Breer still enlivens many of these problems with a sense of urgency, his work is never contained by the potential within painting of a uniformly modular structure (or the concurrent development into Op art by Vasarély). Breer's image, *Untitled*, 1950 (Figure 13), for instance, makes reference to spatial depth and evokes a landscape with a three-quarter horizon line upon which is set an orb. This is surrounded by the idiosyncratic free-hand intersection of geometric shapes, the once controversial diagonal,⁴⁷ and constituted by discernable variation in the brushwork of warm and subdued non-primary tones which overlap at times, and slip underneath or beyond the unsystematic grid-like borderlines of *Untitled*, staging the foundation

for Breer's own particular impulse and trajectory.



Figure 14. Mondrian, *Tableau I: Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow*, 1921, (oil on canvas, 103x100cm).

In Mondrian's trajectory, from Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.17) later standpoint, there was increasingly 'no way out', with respect to the pursuit of 'absolute formal values'. Mondrian's (1987f, p.29) exploration of the integral differentiation of the arts and the sense of the *discovery* of abstraction in the so-

⁴⁶ Image Source: (Mondrian, 1921)

⁴⁷ Refers to the anecdote that Mondrian and van Doesburg clashed over the underlying spatio-temporal conception of the diagonal in abstract painting. See: (Fer, 2000, p.53). The oblique, Mondrian (1987j, pp.210-11) argues in *Home-Street-City*, 1926 is expressive not only of movement but also of time, and has a spatial relativity which binds vision to a bodily perspective in contrast to the composition of horizontals and verticals whose oppositional dynamism potentially 'annihilates form' and affords a 'denaturalized abstraction', a relation to 'universal' principles which has the broader social implications to 'destroy the *tragic* expression of home, street, and city.' See: Richter's oblique line, (Figure 19) and Breer's (Figure 28, 30).

called *pure*⁴⁸ relationships of form, and the ‘liberation of line and color’⁴⁹ through the development of an intensified, and internalized abstraction of the pictorial tradition of painting becomes culturally ossified. The initial move towards the transformative renewal of Art and its affects through the conceptual and aesthetic consideration of its potentially internally-consistent *determinate* relationships becomes a prescriptively reductive linearity, planarity and limited, non-representational palette. The provocative underlying bid at the core of neoplasticism for a dialectics at play in its language of construction, Mondrian (1987e, p.231) argues, ‘is as destructive as it is constructive’ and becomes in time virtually eclipsed.

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Mondrian’s (1987g, pp.168-9) own particular quasi-Hegelian notion of neoplasticism, which is indicative likewise not of art’s veneration but its speculative, ‘becoming’ dissolution, when ‘architecture, sculpture, painting, and decorative art will then merge, that is to say, become architecture-as-our-environment’ or art’s ‘reconstruction-as-life’ that sets out to ‘collaboratively’ ascertain ‘what in the future is *universally valid*.’ For Mondrian this dialectical process of ‘working against itself’ is part of the tenets and temporality of *new art*, (its sense of expressing the contemporary and a futural relation, as well as, a concern with dynamizing its foundation in past art) with Mondrian (p.169) contending that ‘art is already in partial disintegration – but its end *now* would be premature’.

In Mondrian’s (1987b, p.113) *Dialogue* the significance of Mondrian’s Paris studio is alluded to in a question of whether the room, which was treated experimentally like a lived-in painting-installation, could be ‘perceived as a whole all at once.’ Mondrian evokes a single *image*, that considers architecture from the standpoint of painting, through an anti-volumetric reduction of a room to a multiplicity of planes, that ultimately comprise an aesthetic synthesis, or the total impression of a planar image, similar to chronophotography (Marey, Muybridge), and cinematic perception.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, following Cooper’s (1988, p.122) discussion of the duration of neoplastic painting, Mondrian (1987c, p.162) describes its reception as the synthesis of successive impressions in which, ‘after a total impression, our eye goes from a plane to opposition, from opposition to plane.’

Mondrian, (p.163) concludes his article with a description that presents a relation between neoplastic painting and sound, which acknowledges that because ‘time and space are different

⁴⁸ In a note Mondrian (1987a, p.377) writes, ‘Pure art only a technical term (expression).’

⁴⁹ (Mondrian, 1987h, p.301)

⁵⁰ (This planar reading, Bois (1987, p.121) argues, becomes unconvincing in the architectural theory of the period.)

expressions of *the same thing*, [...] the planes and their composition cannot be taken directly from Neo-Plastic painting, for their expression in time, (as in music) has different requirements,' and stresses that moving beyond the current disequilibrium of the 'physical-spiritual' would likely be necessary to achieve this e.g. a greater sense of liberation, and a 'new concept of beauty' (p.168).⁵¹ The former temporal depiction chimes with Breer's practical transposition of 'neoplastic' inspired painting into pre-cinematic (mutoscope, flipbook etc.) and across various mediums connected to the cinematic movement of the *Form Phases* series, 1952-4, as well as the allover emphasis of the screen and the synthesis of the film's image, but must be contrasted to the anticipation of a Neoplastic movement strongly associated with an empirical/aesthetic transcendence.

Alluding to the notion of art's processual merging into reality, or its realization in everyday life forming a total architecture, Mondrian's (1987b, p.113) character of the Neoplastic painter in the *Dialogue*, nevertheless, reflexively raises the doubt of the possibility of art's fusion, or more specifically of the architectural ideal, asking, 'is it so desirable to see the plastic expression *as a whole*? Doesn't *painting* still remain too much a 'thing'? Cooper (1988, p.125) reads this as a critique of art remaining objectified in the 'classical pictorial goals of unity and instantaneity.' The statement can be taken as referring to the way that Mondrian also held individual works to be simultaneously independent objects in a dialectic with a universal impetus. Neoplastic artworks in this perspective were taken to be an acknowledgement and a desire to counter the inherent contradictions of current conditions, with Bois (1987, p.117) arguing that for Mondrian, 'a picture is "the most abstract thing possible," the "most direct" expression of the "abstract" (all Mondrian's texts insist on this relativity); but it also remains a thing that is "posed against."

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Despite abstraction's impact, its effect became for many, like Breer, ostensibly proscriptive, be it in the restriction to primary colors, verticals and horizontals, or the mandate to delimit content, and the attendant meanings of form. Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) asserts that the pursuit of a plastic absolute, 'seemed at odds with the number of variations [he] could develop around a single theme,' continuing that the contradictions abstraction presented deepened his concern and interest in 'change itself and finally in cinema as a means of exploring this further.'

While not discounting Breer's genuine concern over the apparently reductive impulse of its modernist preoccupations, it is nonetheless intriguing that putting such contradictions into play

⁵¹ The 'plastic expression of the universal' is also raised in Mondrian's (1987b, p.113) *Dialogue*, in a dialectic with the individual subject equated with 'natural expression', and sublated by engagement in theoretical and practical activities whose force is carried forth in a movement toward Art and Culture; Freedom allied to 'living reality as beauty' (p.116) is rooted in the truth of its appearance.

does not go unrecognized, but becomes fundamental to Mondrian's (1987f, pp.31,32) conception of abstraction which is an on-going undertaking with potentially real world implications. Mondrian (1987d, p.298) reiterates how the task of 'real' non-figurative art is to 'destroy static equilibrium by establishing a *dynamic* one,' continuing that 'if the form is without content, without universal thought, it is the fault of the artist'.

Further to what Breer surmised, it might be added that the pictorial elements within Mondrian's oeuvre were deductively delimited to heighten and explore the tensions that he felt the 'analytical' logic of cubist abstraction had first presented, a sentiment also echoed by Richter. This is especially evident, it is generally felt, in works after the 1920s and in his conception of neoplasticism, which attempts to ascertain in a quintessentially modernist framework the irreducible domain of painting and the gamut of its non-objective, but real, effects, as Mondrian (1987d, p.240) writes in *Cubism and Neoplastic*, 1930,

To express free rhythm, *it is necessary* to use means as simple as straight line and primary color. And the relationship of position – the rectangular relationship – is indispensable in order to express the immutable in opposition to the variable character of the relationships of dimension. This is not to show a lack of 'instinct for preservation'(!) nor to be 'governed by exasperated cerebrality.' It is on the contrary, 'to create' a reality that is concrete and living for our senses, although detached from the transitory reality of form. That is why I would prefer to define Neo-Plastic as *Superrealism*, in opposition to Realism and *Surrealism*.

Despite Mondrian's professed desire to engage with the *determinate* aspects of painting, the innovative composer and pioneer of *indeterminate* (chance) music, Feldman⁵² (1985, pp.110, 101) nevertheless cogently observes in relation to what he calls *Abstract Experience*, the way in which the question of experience resides *in* the work, 'and all the time, nobody was reading it, nobody was seeing the touch, nobody was looking at the handwriting on the wall' (p.110), continuing, '...there is an almost *indeterminate*⁵³ aspect in Mondrian. Not in relation to the placement of his square, but in how he painted toward it. Mondrian did not begin with the square. He slowly arrived at it, arrived at it not as a consummate idea (this came only toward the end of his life), but as antagonist as well as protagonist. In effect Mondrian is fighting the square – resisting it. He erases – he paints on it – he paints over it - bypasses it – ignores it – destroys it.' (p.101)

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⁵² Composer and writer associated with the 1950s New York art scene of Abstract Expressionism and Neo-Dadaism.

⁵³ (associated primarily with the particularities of nature and the individual, not timeless universals)

Mondrian (1987f, p.51) refutes the charge that neoplastic art is an idealism without real affects, or that it does not arise from experience of the world. Rather, the rigorously ascertained *determinate*⁵⁴ relations and the necessarily constructive meet, and ‘like all art, it remains relative and to some degree still *arbitrary*: if it were to become as absolute as the universal plastic means allow, it would overstep the limits of art.’ Mondrian (1987k, p.323) moreover contends that such art is not merely a mechanical process but systems are ‘revealed to artists through their practical researches’, and ‘guided by intuition’ beyond individual sentiments and inclinations leading (like developmental loops in which disturbances are phased in as positive feedback) to further revelations of ‘the subjective and objective factors in mutual balance.’ (1987d, p.299) He continues, that the rigors of such abstract paintings in close conjunction with other arts and ‘our surrounding environment... actual plastic reality’ might have a constructive effect as part of the creation, more broadly, of a ‘new plastic reality.’ (p.299) This connection in which abstract art is perceived as a sphere of freedom is part of a culturally progressive movement toward greater clarity and concord.⁵⁵

The notion of change activated does not reside within the image itself, but its utopic moment of *dynamic equilibrium* resonates against the difficulties of the surrounding world. In this manner, Mondrian (p.299) contends that, ‘it would be illogical to suppose that non-figurative art will remain stationary, for this art contains a *culture* of the use of new plastic means and their determinate relations.’ In contrast to commonly assumed (undialectical) suppositions of harmonic balance and the priority of transcendence, in his later conception of neoplasticism Mondrian (1987l, p.240) maintains that its form of *denaturalized abstraction* is constituted through the art’s *work* through a relation between the *abstract-real*, by achieving with each piece a *dynamic equilibrium*, (within the limitations of a series). These then could be considered to present the development of variations in formal values held between the universal and the ‘specificity of the non-specific’ (Didi-Huberman, 2005, p.6) of an image,

If it is true that the Purist search was for the invariable, for the absolutely stable, Neoplastic does not seek this. Neoplastic tries to express the *invariable and the variable at the same time and in equivalence*. Precisely for this reason it must have a universal means. Its search is not for the absolutely stable, which cannot be expressed ‘plastically,’ and *it opposes itself to the stable in nature*.

Challenging the status of the individual, neoplastic constructivism has become a contentious

⁵⁴ Associated with the universal (in nature): ‘the new plastic expresses beauty as truth through the absoluteness of its plastic means’ (Mondrian, 1987f, p.51)

⁵⁵ The realization of beauty as truth, the ultimate universal e.g. see: ‘Liberation from Oppression in Art and Life’, 1939-1940, (Mondrian, 1987k).

issue for subjective modes that are likely to be excluded and subjugated by a less-expansively reflective universal scope, (a critique duly raised by the framework of feminism and the more recent demands for recognition made by intersectional feminism). Mondrian (1987f, pp.31-2) goes on to frame a dynamic within the ongoing undertaking of art between the ‘individuality of style’ and the absolute (purportedly timeless structures) whose tendencies in nature and in form are to be continually ‘made manifest’ through the execution of each and every work. He posits the contemporaneity of this dynamic, arguing that ‘because the individuality of style provides the mode and degree in which the absolute is made visible, it shows the spiritual outlook of the time and is precisely what makes a style appropriate to its period and constitutes its vitality.’ Mondrian’s (1987f, p.42) later concept of *dynamic equilibrium* should certainly be differentiated from his earlier controversial thinking of a more *static* delineation of an ‘equilibrated relation of individual and universal’.

The ensuing reduction of neoplasticism’s *self-reflexively* deduced limits discounts the ways, as we have tried to recover, that such works and their aesthetic, abstract-conceptualizations are part of an attempt to engage with and critique the increasing inadequacy and routinization of earlier Expressionism. Mondrian also aims at the disturbance of (bourgeois) individualism in the context of the domination of subjectivism within Expressionism, and to this extent explicitly exemplifies a potentially critical moment within neoplasticism. This is associated with the ineffectual moralizing of the bourgeoisie and portrayed by the ‘predominant expression of *sentiment*’, which Mondrian (1987g, p.169) decries as art in the service of propaganda as a form of literature.

Shifting focus from the overemphasis on subjectivism⁵⁶ but not denying of the role of experience in art, which ‘would be destroyed if its subjectivity were completely destroyed,’ Mondrian (1987f, pp.51, 49) presents, ‘the departure from naturalism in painting not as an attack on, or dissolution (in the sense of loss) of nature, but as its crystallization’. While he frames the role and aspirations of modern abstract painting in terms of the more problematic notion of the artist at the vanguard of the ‘evolution in consciousness’ (p.50), it is important to recover a sense of this coupled with an intensified suspicion of the illusions of individualism, along with, conversely, the manipulation of ‘collective subjectivism’ that masks an exploitative socio-political subjugation. This resonates with Benjamin’s (1973a, p.234) epilogue to ‘The Work of Art’, 1936, essay where he plaintively reports that, ‘Fascism sees its salvation in giving the masses not their right [sic. socio-economic justice], but instead a chance to express themselves.’

⁵⁶ ‘Depending on the character of our consciousness, we see either the objective or the subjective, the universal or the individual, the abstract or the concrete as *the determinate*.’ (Mondrian, 1987f, p.70)

The impassioned debates and lively disputes from which neoplasticism developed were increasingly overshadowed by an iconically purified geometric abstraction that was no longer part of an ongoing quest related to constructive processes, but rendered instead systematic despite Mondrian's own warnings against this. In high modernist debates on fine and decorative arts, Fer (1993, pp.154-58) explains how an antithesis between luxury and utility develops, which she sees as being linked to the constructivist disdain for the non-integral status of the decorative. This is typically allied to the expressive caprices of the hand-made, along with the new optimistic esteem for technological and mechanical processes, truth-to-materials, and honesty-of-construction.

These distinctions, however, can be understood conversely as a period within constructivism, where the notion of artistic praxis is profoundly rethought, distinguishing it from composition associated with refined aesthetics and becoming an assertion of technical principles, engineering, and organized construction. It presents an enduring perspective in which an artist's research into the analysis of materials is imperative, and underpinned by the conviction that social change must be accompanied, if not precipitated, by new object relations, and shifts within material organization.⁵⁷

On this account it is interesting to turn to Lodder's (1983) investigation of *Russian Constructivism* and Kiaer's (1997) introduction to the essay by Arvatov, 'Socialist Objects', 1925 which both indicate that despite the bold constructivist aspirations of many artists, such developments in art paradoxically occur at a time when a primary role for the *artist-researcher*, as well as, the productivist experimental laboratory at the very heart of industrial production is increasingly thwarted politically. This is most strikingly explicit, for example, with the post-revolutionary Stalinization of the Soviets. Technological developments of the era enhance, not only the physical scope of traditional substances, but there is also an explosion in the manufacture of new materials such as mass-produced plastics, celluloid etc., which indisputably impacts upon artists' relations to, and conceptions of the fundamental properties of traditional artist's materials, as well as, the conventional hierarchies of their social and artistic organization and value. (This sense of fundamental shifts has been experienced more recently since the 1990s with debates resurfacing about the materialism of film and revaluation of analogue modes in reaction to the prevalence of the 'digital revolution'.)

In this context, the disruption of the divisions between the ostensibly subjective, hand-made qualities and the apparently systematized and mechanized within the photographic and cinematic

⁵⁷ See, for instance, Brown (2001, p.10) (2013, p.286) following figures, such as, Rodchenko and Arvatov, the Russian theorist of Productivist Constructivism of the 1920s 'Everyday life and Culture of the Thing', 1925.

machine becomes a key theme, associated with Dada montage construction and contingency for artist filmmakers within ‘graphic cinema’, such as Breer, and earlier filmmakers in the tradition of Dadaist ‘absolute animation’ steeped in cubism and neoplasticism, e.g. see (Sitney, 2002, pp.269, 231). Furthermore, in association with constructive neoplasticism, such divisions would seem to elide the contradiction that arises between the attempts to systematize the thought pervading, for instance, Mondrian’s writings, and what the painstaking, hand-painted, diminutively recalibrating process of the artworks propose for modern experience and for art in the immediate service of aesthetic freedom.

Foregrounding the striking idiosyncrasy, the marked newness, and ‘how truly personal’ such work by Mondrian is, the composer Feldman (1985, p.70) observes that, at a certain level, ‘the system cannot help us here... the work has been done *on its own terms*.’ This is associated with monumental shifts in art as Feldman (p.98) continues, ‘With Cezanne it is always how he sees that determines how he thinks, where the modernist, on the other hand, has changed perception by way of the conceptual. In other words, how one *thinks* has become the sensation.’ Feldman (p.101) later concludes, ‘We must be grateful, however, that Mondrian the Messiah failed, for that failure gave us Mondrian the painter. It was because, in his own words, he was involved with “total sensuousness – total intuition” that Mondrian finally *felt* his way out of Cubism.’

‘Once painting was freed from the imitation of nature, it automatically sought further freedom’, writes Mondrian (1987f, p.63). But neoplasticism as constituted in Mondrian’s (pp.55, 53) own work, is expressed not only by its audacious scope to project a beacon of *dynamic equilibrium* in a world of *tragic*, ‘disequilibrated expression of the universal and individual’, but interestingly, this is matched by the painstaking fragility of each individually hand-painted work, delicately marred by the traces of its processes and its circumspect, exploratory modifications; ‘The artist sees the tragic to such a degree that he is compelled to express the non-tragic’.

Discussing Zurich Dada in *Dada: Art and Anti-art*, Richter likewise recounts a strong antipathy to the hypocrisy of bourgeois sentiment and the desire to make explicit the improvident material effects and the underbelly of its blinkered high-minded morality. This is in keeping with the manifestly ‘illogical’, absurdist, and contradictory Dadaist demonstrations, which were rooted in a socio-cultural critique from a wartime perspective, and what seemed to be, at the time, the penultimate aftermath of bourgeois culture’s rational scientism, capitalist values and zealous faith in progress.

Mondrian’s concern with *dynamic equilibrium* can be considered in relation to Richter’s (1965, p.25) concern for a universal language in form, elucidated by his inclusion of a quote from Arp’s

Dadaland expounding Zurich Dada's take on abstraction, which while not part of a spiritual or (philosophical) idealism, is neither an entirely destructive nor negative critique. Its gist is perhaps more akin to constructivist utopianism:⁵⁸ 'Revolted by the butchery of the 1914 World War... we were seeking an art based on fundamentals, to cure the madness of the age, and a new order of things that would restore the balance between heaven and hell.' Richter (1965, p.47) likewise affirms Dada's abstraction, in contradistinction to the subjectivism of Expressionism, for how it 'holds aloof from complexities, [but] not through ignorance of them. Sentiment must go and so must the dialectical process, which takes place only on the canvas itself.'

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The Objective Relations and Temporal Poetics of Richter's Filmic Abstraction

While Breer's work is considered here to be indicative of a 1950s neo-dadaism, his processual experimentation in abstract film in the *Form Phases* series developed across various mediums including the film, *Form Phases IV*, 1954, has a resonance with what Richter (1952, p.79) has called 'aesthetic research' and can be situated in the lineage of Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, 1921. The emphasis upon Richter's quest for universal principles, or in terms of an architectural ideal as a mediation of screens, (Michaud, 2012) might be tempered by a reading of *Rhythm 21* and its associated writings in terms of a mode of 'aesthetic research', prior to becoming a monument to such principles. Richter maintains a curb upon subjective autonomy with its 'model of projection' checked by material structuration, as well as an abstraction that is at once non-representational, but also holds distinct traces of the world in a dynamic that imparts its singular force. Describing a relation between the *writerly* text and structuration Barthes (1974, p.20) allows for such tensions, 'The blanks and looseness of the analysis will be like footprints marking the escape of the text; for if the text is subject to some form, this form is not unitary, architectonic, finite: it is the fragment, the shards, the broken or obliterated network – all the movements and inflections of a vast *dissolve*, which permits both overlapping and loss of messages.'

While the modernist moment of such work is being revisited once again today from a postconceptual perspective, the way in which Breer situates his work must to an extent be differentiated from these earlier Dadaist disputes about art and *anti-art*, and more fundamentally, from the form of conceptual aesthetics underpinning modernist abstraction. In light of the long shadows of these debates it is interesting to turn briefly to the question raised by Turvey (2003, p.14). He asks how the elegant movement of Richter's absolute film, with its original impetus as part of a search for expressions of a *universal language* might nevertheless be claimed to be a

⁵⁸ However their energies are not in the main speculatively directed toward a utopian future, but to change the present.

Dadaist work, which is typically associated with discordance and critically irreverent *anti-art*, such as, the canonical film, *Entr'acte*, 1924, by Clair and Picabia. Or again, Richter's own later absurdist comedy in live-action and stop-motion, *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, 1928, that plays in the space between the reawakening of the senses and the full impact of the world with all its routinization and normality. *Ghosts Before Breakfast* imbues the fast-paced illogical incidents presented with a broader sense of mischievous agency, foregrounding its anarchic sensibility at the beginning with a frontispiece stating that, 'even objects revolt against regimentation'.

The decidedly anti-war, anarchistic collectivization, and internationalist spirit of the Dada art movement, began during the bloody years of WWI. It integrated aspects from Futurism and Cubism, Huelsenbeck (1951b, p.280) a key Berlin Dada participant has argued, but without any definitive creed or imposition of style. The Dadaist abstraction declared in Richter's film work and theorizations are consistent with the broad-ranging artist-research and extensive experiments in abstraction of Zurich Dada. This approach can be contrasted, on the one hand, to the overtly political perspectives within predominantly figurative compositions of Berlin Dada photomontage, and on the other, to the overt displacement of customary meaning and pictorial ambiguity of *synthetic* Cubist collage, in which the properties of materials are no longer treated in terms of *determinate* or 'necessary form', nor necessarily structured by a sense of truth-to-materials, as seen with Picasso's assemblages whose graphic syntax inventively distorts form.⁵⁹

Richter's (1952, p.79) work becomes impelled by a broader praxis than cubist structure, per se, and he notes that while influenced by Cubism, he 'was not satisfied with what it offered.' Yet, exploring the limits of form within a non-representational filmic mode might, as Richter (1952, p.79) argues, 'help to break down the stupid prejudice that plastic problems in the art of our time can be solved only on canvas or in bronze.' Conjointly Dada came to be celebrated for the 'new medium' of collage (Huelsenbeck, 1951a, p.36), its experimentation and cross-disciplinary tendencies encompassing painting, sculpture, the sculptural environment, and in literature, 'the plasticity of the word' (Ball, 1951, p.52) was developed as image, sound poetry, and performance.

As Richter (1965, p.42) quotes in relation to a performance event, 'in these phonetic poems we want to abandon a language ravaged and laid barren by journalism. We must return to the deepest alchemy of the Word, and leave even that behind us, in order to keep safe for poetry its holiest sanctuary.' Dada sought to re-appropriate language from its instrumentalization within, for instance, the sphere of culture's increasingly commodified status, scientism, and an alienated industrialized bureaucratism. It is associated with prizing open the discourse on the freedom of language (including speech at the individual level of *parole*) with its cost-free accessible

⁵⁹ See: (Rowell, 1978, pp.90-91).

potentiality, along with the more notable recycling of media materials during a period of limited wartime resources for more traditional media, but also of the powerfully expressive shattering of forms to expose their ideological implications, a counterblast lobbed back at the mediated complacency of the world, by directly utilizing its own fabricated and manipulated image, in the form of printed matter, everyday mass materials and objects. A critique of the apparent transparency of language is taken up by Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) in later works in which words become multivalent objects steeped in popular culture, as well as, having what he calls, 'emotional qualities' and will be discussed in association with the film *Bang!*, 1986, Chapter 6.

The famously irreverent, so-called destructive, *anti-art* interventions of the movement are also often allied, for instance, with the emphatic provocations and proclamatory deed of the manifesto, which takes its sharpest aim at freedom – a freedom also sought in forms of abstraction, as Richter (1965, p.34) notes, 'that might (and did) lead either to a new art – or to nothing.' Richter (1965, p.91) asserts, '[w]ith Picabia the words, "Art is dead" seem always to be followed by a faint echo: "Long live Art." With Duchamp the echo is silent. [...] An illusion has been dispelled by the use of a logic. [...] He reversed the signposts of value so that they all point into a void.' Richter's (1965, p.123) own opinion and experience of the anti-aesthetic attitude associated with Dadaist *anti-art* position remained to a great extent skeptical. Breer's (Obrist, 2001, p.3) own concern with the dilettantism and 'conceptual playing' of e.g. Picabia and the desire for 'more plastic richness' is situated in relation to Richter and Schwitters and discussed further in Chapter 4.

This can be elucidated retrospectively, for instance, as Osborne (2002, p.49) argues in *Conceptual Art*, that 'a dialectical understanding of the term anti-art acknowledges that anti-art must occupy the field of art to oppose it, and that anti-art is thus a peculiar, paradoxical or liminal kind of art'. Richter (1965, pp.123, 128) remained broadly unconvinced at the time by the casuistic framing of Dadaist injunctions as *anti-art*. While, Huelsenbeck (1951c, p.41) an ardent proponent of *anti-art*, nevertheless, in *En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism*, 1920, vigorously rebuked the criticism that Dada was 'only of negative value.'

In contrast to the Dadaist focus upon the un-aesthetic (Picabia⁶⁰) and the conceptually anti-aesthetic gestures of Duchamp, in the article 'Easel-Scroll-Film', 1952 Richter makes the argument for an 'aesthetic research' that is, nonetheless, imbued with principles.⁶¹ Richter (1952,

⁶⁰ 'Every page', Picabia (Richter, 1965, p.76) says, 'must explode, whether through seriousness, profundity, turbulence, nausea, the new, the eternal, annihilating nonsense, enthusiasm for principles, or the way it is printed. Art must be unaesthetic in the extreme, useless and impossible to justify'.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Huelsenbeck's (1951a, p.244) tirade at the art-establishment trappings of late Expressionism and its bourgeois spiritualism, individual subjectivism, and its 'sentimental resistance'.

p.79) correlates the expressive basis of abstraction with ‘Nature’ or the systems and principles of objective conditions, while refusing its representational depiction whose limits were felt to be evident in Cubism and must be exceeded. Richter (1952, p.79) asserts that with the shift from subject matter, absolute abstraction initially afforded the impression of an overwhelming freedom, associated with subjective and artistic autonomy in which he was, ‘increasingly faced with the conflict of suppressing spontaneous expression in order to gain an objective understanding of a fundamental principle’.

As much as we both loved the early work of Kandinsky, we still thought that such free improvisations as his would have to come ‘later’, after a general principle had been established. [...] This principle would be the challenge, a point of resistance, against any anarchistic abuse of freedom and, as such, a psychological stimulus – not a chain. We saw in completely liberated (abstract) form not only a new medium to be exploited, but the challenge toward a ‘universal language’. [...] We sought to achieve a more than purely subjective solution; we felt very definitively prepared to sacrifice whatever had to be sacrificed of individual spontaneous expression, for the time being, in order to clarify and ‘purify’ the material – form and color – until the very principle itself became expressive; ‘to carry on in the same way as Nature organizes matter, but to use only its principles, not its forms,’ in Eggeling’s words.

While abstraction was broadly held by modernists to be an index of freedom, the collaborative work of Richter and Eggeling sought distance from the emphasis upon abstract expressiveness and the inherent subjectivism of its analysis of form and feeling. Even so, the abstraction epitomized by Kandinsky is underpinned by a special ‘empathy’ between ‘inner necessity’ and the outside world, as well as, aspiring to the ‘transcendental world of spirit’. (Foster et al., 2004, p.87)



The expressiveness of Kandinsky’s abstraction is also briefly referenced by Breer in Chapter 6, p.202.

Figure 15. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*, 1921, (3min, 16mm).

Taking up a more restrained perspective on transformative spatial relations, Richter’s study of formal interactions and the utilization of contrapuntal music analogies

evidently underpin the film *Rhythm 21*. Richter (1952, p.79) in collaboration with Eggeling set out to ‘discover which *expressions* a form would and could take under the various influences of *opposites*: little against big, light against dark, one against many, top against bottom, and so forth.

By connecting (*equilibrating*) the strongest contrasts of the most varied order intimately with their opposites through similarities which he [sic. Eggeling] termed *analogies*, he could control an unlimited multiplicity of relationships.’ The study of form was for Richter (1952, pp.78-9) to be exhaustively undertaken within film, out of which the framework of *contrast-analogies*, visual *counterpoint* in rhythm and reversals was developed, underpinning the *orchestration* of formal relationships and presenting an overall principle of *continuity*. This can be differentiated e.g. from the dialectic of Mondrian’s (1987d, p.294) ‘destructive-constructive’ notion of *dynamic equilibrium*.

These *contrast-analogies* become evident in the film *Rhythmus 21* through its pared down deployment and variations on the planarity of the rectangular shapes (echoing the film frame and screen). Determining the fundamental principles within the materials of abstraction would, it was envisioned, reach a universal expressivity, presenting, for instance, the new filmic experience of temporality, which would be revealed, Richter (1952, p.81) argued, by ‘things in flux’. As quoted earlier, Richter (1952, pp.78, 79) continues, ‘from the standpoint of polarity’ which presented ‘a philosophic way of dealing with the experience of growth’ amidst the war-time rubble and fragments left by *analytical* cubism; ‘We saw in the completely liberated (abstract) form not only a new medium to be exploited, but the challenge towards a *universal language* [...] which would restore to the arts its social function.’



Figure 16. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*.

To this extent, the more recent consideration by Michaud (2012, p.338) stresses that the aesthetic of *Rhythmus 21* is ‘determined not in terms of the viewpoint of an individual subject as in montage practice, but by structure.’ Or, to expand upon Michaud’s suggestion, one could argue, that the conceptual trajectories and aesthetic

structuration of Richter’s film *Rhythmus 21* is determined in part by its broader evaluation of subjectivism arising from debates and the forceful critiques of individualism whose overestimation was deemed to afflict much of late Expressionism.

Likewise, such an *orchestration* of forms is also an attempt to move beyond Dada’s canonically nihilistic stance, and the more irreverent, so-called destructive *anti-art* interventions within Berlin Dada collages and manifestos, as exemplified by Huelsenbeck’s early Dada history. Richter (1965, p.64) aims, rather, to find a more nuanced and inclusive critique of modernity that might hold

differences and polarizations in balance, thus bringing into contention the dynamic of its many tropes, 'reason and anti-reason, sense and non-sense, design and chance, consciousness and unconsciousness – this was the central message of Dada.'

Richter was also a participant of the International Constructivism movement of 'progressive artists' that convened in 1922, with their manifestos published in *De Stijl* V, no. 4, 1922 (Bann, 1974, pp.58-69).⁶² They expressed the postwar desire to establish an international culture, dealing with *universal* problems, and an *objective* 'systemization of the means of expression' (p.68). This collective perspective would be engaged beyond an old individual subjectivism, and the ineffectuality of late Expressionism, based in personal ambition and spiritual isolationism. It is important, here, to reiterate that differing artists, such as, Mondrian, Léger, Richter etc. perceived the innovations of abstraction to be not only apposite to the problems of the day but as intimated, to be in a *realist* mode, oriented by an 'objective' (p.63) praxis and approach. Although the turn to abstraction during this period along with the contradictory correlations between its conceptual impulse, idealism and materialism is often regarded as symptomatic of a withdrawal from the sharp edge of modern life, many argue, such as Foster (2013) and Wood (1993, p.257) etc., that its historicity can equally be read as indicative of the vicissitudes of the modern world whose own inherent abstractions become increasingly difficult to represent in traditional ways.

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Richter's film *Rhythmus 21*, 1921 was presented in *The Absolute Film* screening, May 3, 1925, Berlin, as part of the first survey of the nascent field of 'pure' or absolute cinematic abstraction. O'Doherty (1977) argues that with focus on 'the formal integrity of the screen as a flat surface, Richter made his first and perhaps most important contribution to the aesthetics of film.' To reiterate, spatial and tonal variations are developed out of the basic elements of the frame to advance a sense of underlying principles and the visual development of a formal vocabulary in relation to the quest for, what Richter (1971, p.113) polemically calls, a 'new universal language'.

Rhythmus 21 is elaborated through sequences of dynamic rhythms in counterpoint; the play of positive-negative reversals, shifting spatial contrasts from changes in the bold vertical and horizontal elements of the screen's frame, or tightly constrained rectilinear transformations in size and shape of figure-ground relations, that accompanies the explicit impression of advancing and receding depth within the projected illusory 3D space of the screen, which is subsequently undercut, for instance, with jumpcuts between small and large squares.

⁶² 'The Congress of International Progressive Artists', 1922. Richter (Bann, 1974, p.58) it is noted however maintained an emphasis on artistic considerations within the artists' working community, see the 'Statement by the Constructivist Groups of Rumania, Switzerland, Scandinavia and Germany' (Bann, 1974, pp.66-9).



Figure 17. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*.

Even so, it should be reiterated, that despite the subsequent accolades, the film largely focused upon the elegant assertion of its formal limits – in which the flatness of the film frame and screen is recursively underscored by the divergent rhythms of the square at play. This becomes, for Richter,

superseded or displaced, as one is confronted at another level in the process, with time itself, which he reiterates with analogies to music composition, to a sense of the *orchestration* of filmic *continuity*, duration, and to the new optic problem of temporal scoring. In the article, ‘The Badly Trained Sensibility,’ 1924, Richter (1987, pp.22-23) proposes the development of a cinematic sensibility beyond the focus upon form, as such, and which organizes around a (de-subjectivized) principle of coherence and intensity of *feeling* and *thinking power* stating,

This film gives memory nothing to hang on. At the mercy of *feeling*, reduced to going with the rhythm according to the successive rise and fall of the breath and the heartbeat, we are given a sense of what feeling and perceiving really is: a process - movement. This *movement* with its own organic structure is not tied to the power of association (sunsets, funerals), nor to emotions of pity (girl match-seller, once famous - now poor - violinist, betrayed love), nor indeed to *content* at all, but follows instead its own inevitable mechanical laws.



Figure 18. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*.

Describing the contrapuntal movements, Lawder (1975, p.52) in *The Cubist Cinema* argues that in *Rhythmus 21*, ‘a pictorial composition of constant imbalance is created. [...] No single form seems to move in isolated activity, for the compositional interdependence of these formal elements is far greater than in static paintings of similar

design – the movements of each form seem inexorably linked to movement elsewhere on screen.’ The film’s original subtitle was *Film is Rhythm*, and the orchestration of forms becomes the articulation of the rhythms of time itself in a spatio-temporal entwinement with the processes of reception. In a written passage entitled ‘Rhythm’, 1926, Richter (1971, p.136) contends, ‘Rhythm

is not a definite, regular succession in time or space, but the unity binding all parts into a whole. [...] Just as thought gives the value to an abstract work so rhythm gives a meaning to forms.’ Closing his reflection upon the film *Rhythmus 21*, Lawder (1975, p.52) asserts moreover that the modulating kinetics of the imagery presents, ‘perfect examples of neoplasticism in motion.’

One might argue, however, as suggested, that the approach in *Rhythmus 21* is not entirely consonant with Mondrian’s neoplasticism, if one takes into account the deductive, dialectical development associated with Mondrian’s work, which is differentiated from Richter’s (1971, p.136) emphasis on strong contrasts, and *continuity* within ‘the idea of the whole.’ Furthermore, Richter (1952, p.78) comes to distance such aesthetic research in the opening of ‘Easel-Scroll-Film’, 1952, recalling that the square was once held up by neoplasticism like the cross to be ‘the sign of a new humanity’ adding ‘we were a little perturbed and sceptical about van Doesberg’s statement, but we understood its spirit’. Dissociating the movement of his film from the increasingly over-determined iconography of form, in which the square planar surface, becomes touched, during this period of strife by a dramatic idealism, Richter (1971, p.131) recollects,

I told him [Alfred Barr] it had nothing to do with *De Stijl* or with Mondrian; that I chose the rectangle or the square for quite a different reason. [...] The question of whether the square had for me a metaphysical meaning is a question, for which I cannot give the right answer because, of course, the square has for every human being a meaning; but what that meaning might be is not the point here.

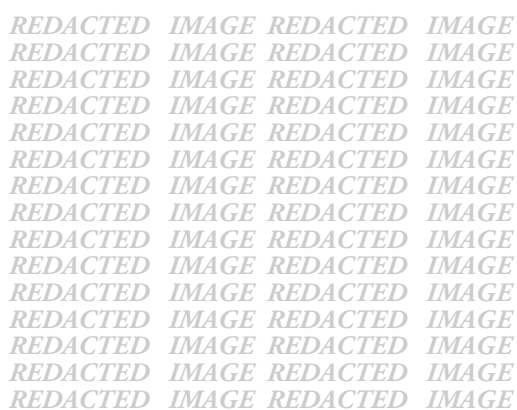


Figure 19. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*. (inclusion of the once controversial diagonal; Footnote 47).

In ‘*Rhythmus 21* and the Genesis of Filmic Abstraction’, Michaud (2012, p.340) postulates that its rectilinear abstraction becomes a generalization of the screen, and ‘makes the transformation of surfaces the unifying element of the arts’, while moreover presenting a specifically

architectonic transformation of filmic experience, which ‘frees itself from the surface to construct itself as architecture in time.’ Such conceptualizations echo Mondrian’s once derided notion of the anti-volumetric reduction of a room to a multiplicity of planes, or perhaps De Stijl’s sensibility of art’s merging or radical dissolution in relation to art as architecture-as-environment (Mondrian). The other important aspect of this conjuncture, which Michaud suggests, is the shift

in modern art from ostensibly ‘static’ forms. *Rhythmus* becomes refigured by Michaud as part of a conception of the art work as a field, ‘no longer a clearly delimited object but a constantly developing continuum.’ This opening beyond static form of the art-object resurfaces in the subsequent 1950s debates associated with Kineticism, and, for instance, Breer’s (anti)kinetic mode of cinema.

The elegant exploration of the *rhythms* of form, spatially dividing and temporally orchestrating what Richter (1952, p.81) has called the ‘movie-canvas’, along with the underlying principles of the impossible quest in abstraction for a ‘universal language’ becomes both a significant influence for Breer, and part of the way he differentiates his approach. From this perspective Richter’s own arguments about the presentation of an aesthetic *logic*, becomes relevant, and involves the viewer in active participation, (e.g. mnemonically and perceptually). Yet, for Breer, as will be explored later, *Rhythmus 21* presented considerable delimitations set by its frame within which the viewer’s eye is directed. Even so, as Richter (1952, p.81) explains concerning this *developing continuum*, ‘In so following the creative process, the beholder experiences it as a *process*, not a single *fact*.’



Figure 20. Richter, *Rhythmus 21*.

Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) indicates he grappled with the latter, arguing ‘that cinematic space, that screen – we’d been building everything into that rectangle. Of course Richter did that in his first movies. That was just more of art’s concrete orthodoxy, that the canvas limits were determined by the interior dynamics of the

painting.’ Breer contrasts such an approach to the prominent ‘open-endedness of American Abstract Expressionist paintings’, continuing, ‘It was no longer necessarily a kind of enclosed composition in which the eye wandered through a prescribed maze of tension and so forth.’ But such discrepancies nevertheless become part of the manoeuvrability in the disposition of a work’s involvement, and part of the question of the potential open-endedness of a delimited object (as part of its historicity). Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) continues, ‘I liked the fact that compositions were getting opened – the idea of the surface extending beyond the frame. I saw the frame as getting to be arbitrary and of course that helped very much support the idea of filmic form. When you begin to consider... anything moving around that’s going to bounce off the edge of the canvas, it also has the option of passing behind it, or passing beyond it.’

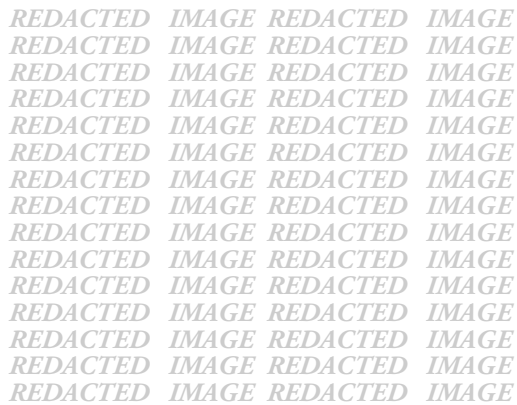


Figure 21. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

The sense of the rhythm as a binding unity within the film *Rhythmus 21* differs notably from the dissociative treatment of forms within Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.19) work, and the striking play of discontinuity, or 'anti-continuity' in the *overall*, and as Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.20) notes, the 'all-over' impact of his films whose rapidity, especially

in his next collage film *Recreation*, 1956, intensifies the question raised by Richter of perception and memory within cinematic experience. Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.44) states that there is a shift, 'from the early geometric things to when I decided that maybe I could break out of these notions of plastic formalism altogether'. It is argued here that this is already appreciable within his geometric film, *Form Phases IV*, 1954.



Figure 22. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Breer's difference from Richter's absolute animation is visible in the playful treatment of geometric forms such as the humorously collapsing square and frame in *Form Phases IV*, (Figure 31). This becomes particularly evident with suggestions of the plenitudes of the everyday, with the incorporation of figurative elements that would have

potentially been deemed trivial within the post-war discourses concerned with geometric abstraction e.g. at Galerie Denise René. Undoubtedly Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.27) was less optimistic than his modernist forbears, about the neutrality, or universality of abstraction. His suspicion of the now ossifying claims for 'pure' abstraction is evident in his later deliberate incorporation of everyday elements that become nevertheless captivating, and is expressed in his reflection upon these tendencies within the 1950s:

I'd begun with an assumption that is no longer valid: that there's a logical progression from figurative to abstract in the history of art, and that this progression was unidirectional; fine art had to be abstract, and illustration or illusionism – including topical satire – was a step backward or a step down, a slightly lower form of expression... Abstract art film wasn't subject to aging, and therefore was a higher form that could

address itself to all of humanity and all situations. Now I see that idea as another chimera, a delusion.



Figure 23. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Despite this caveat, it should be said that Breer is not reflecting specifically on Richter's more complicated thoughts on abstraction, its constructive aims, or ways that *Rhythmus'* elegant non-representational sensibility was, as Richter (1952, p.79) argued, created out of an aesthetic *logic* that,

even so, contained the traces of the systems of 'Nature'. Its structuration of form, Richter (p.79) suggests, invariably encompasses the cinematic orchestration of 'feeling' and 'thinking power'. Breer's processes conversely are energized by the sensible difference at play within abstract and representational forms. However, Breer (Coté, 1962, p.19) becomes not only unperturbed by the 'the power of associations' that Richter (1987, pp.22-23) spurns, but is engaged in the 'non-rational' aspect and the 'unrelationships' possible within and between forms in flux.



Figure 24. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

This moment in the modernist approach to abstraction of a radical delimitation of means, and its particular reimagining of 'the classical enigma of painting' (Feldman, 1985, p.101) had become profoundly problematized by the development of the photographic era, and intensified impact of mass-media. Following Feldman (1985,

pp.103, 118), it could also be argued, that subsequent art from the 1950s, might also be seen as realigning the engagement in 'the consciousness of abstraction' from the speculative subject of *what* is presented within the material-idealism of abstraction (e.g. in neoplasticism and Richter's abstract Dada films) to a renewed focus on materials, techniques, and the process of *how* art comes to matter. Feldman (1985, pp.103, 60) suggests that, 'like the tailor, the composer everywhere is always busy with the yardstick. He doesn't have the problem of truth. What I mean is, he doesn't work with the impossibility of ever reaching it, like the painter or the poet. For the composer the truth is always the process, the system.'



Figure 25. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

This resonates with Breer's shifting focus in abstraction, from the influence of the ostensible subject and strategies of neoplasticism and absolute film to maintaining a new affiliation with it in a concerted effort to explore an expanding notion of medium. For Breer, the critique of

representationalism that absolute abstraction presents, was part of a continued concern with its critique of traditional hierarchies and informs his analysis of formal relations, but also of conventional narrative cinema, as Breer maintains that (Macdonald, 1992, p.22), 'it sets up a constant visual hierarchy that to me is impoverished. I want every square inch of the screen to be potentially active, alive – the whole damn screen. I don't want one thing to take over. The problem with narration is that the figures always dominate the ground. [...] But when it comes to a flat screen, I don't have to have gravity dominate, and I don't want it to dominate.' The critical processes that Breer's filmic world presents must be understood as increasingly playing within a space where representation becomes destabilized, reinvented, and generative of affective difference made available by his exploration of the single-frame aesthetic.

This sensibility can also be contrasted with the meticulous attention to movement exemplified by Norman McLaren's (McLaren & Munro, 1976-78) pedagogic separation of the form of movement from the object animated, tied to a concern with establishing motion that tends to aspire to the semblance of life, as presented in the comprehensive National Film Board of Canada, Animated Motion five-part series. Breer's dynamic, experimental and sometimes roughly hewn aesthetics of the single-frame regarding the *creation* of movement, and concern with the possibilities of the filmic medium, has an affinity rather to Richter's polemic in 'The Film as an Original Art Form'. Richter's (2000, p.15) following argument chimes with Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.18) concern for an animated image beyond that which is 'observed in reality',

The main aesthetic problem in the movies, which were invented for *reproduction* (of movement) is, paradoxically, the overcoming of *reproduction*. In other words, the question is: to what degree is the camera, (film, color, sound, etc.) developed and used to *reproduce* (any object which appears before the lens) or to *produce* (sensations not possible in any other art medium)?

Michaud (2012, pp.340, 339) contends more particularly that the mimetic function of the photographic and pictorial representation itself constitutes a 'model of projection,' which Richter

pares away, and along with his extensive attention to the construction of formal relations, is felt to foster in the film a broader sense of ‘rematerialization and respatialization.’ However, it might be argued that an abstract ‘model of projection’ and conceptualization is nevertheless at work, but whose effects remain open, depending upon whether or not the force of its aesthetic *logic* is felt to be an ungrounding process. This can be contrasted to early cartoon animation, of which however, North (2009, p.130) likewise argues, ‘the idea that recording equals creation is not really a paradox but a strict description of the material facts of the medium.’ Yet, Richter (1952, pp.84-86) himself would posit more particularly that, with the ‘denaturalization of the object’ and ‘expression of new sensations,’ as well as by extending the problems of painting in a manner which could not be addressed within the static medium, film comes into its own. To this extent, the emergent medium *differential-specificity* (Krauss, 1999a, pp.44, 53) that is championed by Richter’s work, is not an absolute abstraction of the film-medium but the scope for a new temporal *poetics*.

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*The Determination of Limits as a Basis for their Rupture:*⁶³

Breer’s Form Phases IV, 1954

I was adding up what I could do with film that painters couldn’t do. I wasn’t competing with painting: I was legitimizing film. Uniqueness enhances the market value of art, but I didn’t want to participate in that way of thinking. I had my democratic idealism to justify working in film – and I didn’t even need that: film was just fun. But I also had a bittersweet attitude about the limited commercial possibilities of working my way. The gap between the legitimacy of painting and of film art was so wide that I couldn’t help openly challenge it.

Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.31)

The antic and pleasurable difficulties encountered by Breer in terms of iteration, variation, change and movement across a series of images or conversely conceived within the duration of an *overall* composition (in film) is evident in the changing emphasis of the explorations of his series, *Form Phases I-IV* (1952-54). Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.19) maintains that, for instance, *Form Phases I* was made using ‘Slidecraft’ technology projecting individual images of transposed aspects of his paintings onto 3x3inch frosted slides, which are re-photographed with a cine-camera. Initially envisaged as an elaboration of the forms within his paintings, Breer (1974, p.35) discusses the shifts to his conception of the dynamic between abstract painting and the filmic

⁶³ (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.42)

space-image stating ‘those first films were really sketches of abstract paintings. It seemed natural at first to treat each frame individually as though it were a painting. In fact, I found I could treat the whole film as if it were a painting.’

Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.20) explores within the spatio-temporal parameters of film, the compositional practice of activating the entire surface, or according each frame an equivalently varied intensity of focus. By inhabiting, counter-intuitively, the diverse array of techniques within film, such as, an emphasis on the single-frame, disjunctively cutting on action etc., Breer periodically undermines the typical concentration of the pictorial surface into stable figure-ground hierarchies, and moreover employs such strategies to interrogate the centrality of a figure in motion against a relatively static background. Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) contends that allowing motion to be treated counter-intuitively at certain stages in the process becomes part of a greater concern with duration itself,

My own approach to film is that of a painter – that is, I try to present the total image right away, and the images following are merely other aspects of and equivalent to the first and final image. Thus, the whole work is constantly presented from beginning to end and, though in constant transformation, is at all times its total self.

Along these lines, Breer does not argue for the consideration of his films in terms of the more traditional *denouement* of an image, nor an image that while abstracted, has elements which cohere in what O’Doherty (1973, p.198) calls, ‘additive synthesis’ of color and forms within painting.⁶⁴ Rather, he argues, in terms of a dynamic perceptual mode of the *overall* image, conveyed and underscored by what Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.22) refers to as the ‘all-over active screen.’ Within this painterly aesthetic discourse, the *overall* impact invariably highlights a differing mode of temporal perception to Richter’s theorizations. This is evident in Mondrian’s neoplasticism, Schwitter’s collage, as well as being central to what Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) describes as the new sense of ‘open-endedness’ of the color-fields of Abstract Expressionism. But this also has significance for other artists working in a neo-dada mode, such as, Rauschenberg, in the post-cubist and overall ‘vernacular glance’ (O’Doherty, 1973, p.201) of his collage aesthetic (that can conversely pose the temporal sense associated with reading the image as discussed in Chapter 5 in relation to the painting, *Rebus*, 1956).

From this perspective it is of interest to consider how Breer’s approach to film, and particularly the notion of the ‘all-over active screen’ resonates with what Silverman (1983, p.247) describes when discussing Barthes’ *writerly text* and the way in which it ‘promotes an infinite play of signification; in it there can be no transcendental signified, only provisional ones which function

⁶⁴ (e.g. pointalist-like evocative of early photography and film printing processes)

in turn as signifiers... 'The writerly text has no syntagmatic order but can be 'entered' at any point.' For Breer (Levine, 1973, p.4), the sense of 'cinema being analytical and synthetic' allows him to play formally and paradigmatically with associated counterparts, as well as, with the force of the total filmic image held within the constraints of the moving-image experienced as it is over time. This is further complicated by the speed of Breer's imagery, and the incorporation of impulses and chance elements, as well as actively encouraging the often unconventional twists that destabilize the initial contrasts within the image, whose exact apperception, he acknowledges, is not guaranteed. The constant transformation within his films tends to resist narrative or classical pictorial order, and while his films have a beginning and come to an end, Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.18) assertion, it should be reiterated, is that they have 'no denouement, no gradual

revelation except for the constantly changing aspects of the statement, in the same manner in which a painting is subjectively modified during viewing'.



Figure 26. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Nonetheless, through his particular engagements, Breer invariably touches upon what became the prevalent modernist maxim of the times (advocated by

Greenberg⁶⁵, for instance), that such modes e.g. painting or film determine the parameters of its medium, and at times its status as an object, and undercut any fictive or illusory elements, such as depth by returning the viewer's gaze to the materials used and to the plane of the picture surface. And, as avant-garde film historian and theorist, Sitney (2002, p.348) has famously adapted for structural film, it has an insistence upon 'shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary.'

Yet, in contrast to the politically inflected transposition of this concept by later structural-materialist filmmakers, such as, Gidal (e.g. that knowledge of production becomes bared in a theoretical relation to knowledge production), Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) suggests that the principles of absolute abstraction within painting became productively *incompatible* with the new range of problems introduced by cinematic motion and 'the domain between motion and still pictures' (typically tied to photographic reproduction).

⁶⁵ In 'Modernist Painting,' 1961, Greenberg (1982, p.7) argues that, 'for the sake of its own autonomy painting has above all to divest itself of everything it might share with sculpture. And it is in the course of its effort to do this, and not so much – I repeat – to exclude the representational or the 'literary', that painting has made itself abstract.'



Figure 27. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Breer discusses the impact of screening with and meeting the earlier generation of artist filmmakers, tempering the need for assertions about discovering and developing a new cinematic language by foregrounding an outlook that is driven intrinsically through a practice-based and technical

knowledge of the medium, and partly imbued with the spirit of the dadaesque ‘monteur.’ Arguing that ‘the cinema medium is just an arbitrary thing which was invented that way to provide for the reproduction of natural movements’, Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) goes on to suggest in the spirit, one can surmise, of the Zurich Dadaist’s *chance collages*, such as Arp’s ‘*Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*’ 1916-17, that what he becomes ‘interested in is to attack the basic material, to tear up film, pick up the pieces and rearrange them’.



Figure 28. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

The sparks that *contingence* produces is not only to do with surprise, but also reframes aesthetic questions, (i.e. from artistic skill, to the destabilization of the iconology of abstract imagery). It contains an integral critique of the authority centered in the expressive artist by indexing a moment that

potentially resists the subject and meaning (as well as, the systematicity or continuity involved in establishing a filmic language). Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.44) argues that ‘cinema provided an opportunity’ to disregard such continuity, even as he continues, ‘I’ll do it in a very methodical way, which was by fracturing, shattering the image so there wasn’t a flaw in it.’ Nevertheless, on presenting the mechanisms of contingency, even more than free-association, Richter (1965, p.64) reminds that its force for Dada once, ‘constituted an essential principle of life and experience, and that reason with all its consequences was inseparable from *unreason* with all its consequences. [...] An inversion was necessary to restore the balance.’

It is worth briefly returning to the misrecognition of Breer’s relation to the avant-garde impulse of subverting conventions, which Breer attempts to foreground, and is made explicit in the

interview with Mekas and Sitney (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.42). In a discussion of his process, Breer broaches the use of surprise elements and fortuitous occurrences within montage. One can surmise that although the appreciation of the serendipitous ‘mistake’ has come to index immediacy, it has moreover become part of a conceptual construct that complicates the primacy of the author. As alluded to earlier Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.169) speaks of his admiration for Arp, and makes a reference to Arp’s⁶⁶ chance compositions from the readymade of fallen (commercial) papers, circa 1917, in relation to both his film work and kinetic sculptures, ‘That Dada gesture gave me permission to appreciate chance in my own compositions. I must see expressive possibilities in non-sequitur references that demand attention – non-sequitur might sometimes be so, sometimes only in the mind of the spectator.’ The conceptual utilization of chance raised avant-garde critiques of artistic intentionality, along with questions of the conventions of taste, and craft. Apprehending spontaneous and chance elements generated for Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.22) a speculative and experimental space for working that was not extensively storyboarded or preplanned. It developed at the liminal edge of dis-order in a dynamic progressively honed by practice and by the direct hands-on control that animation can afford. This process was underpinned by a strong self-reflexive sense of structuration that deft and rigorous editing can impart.



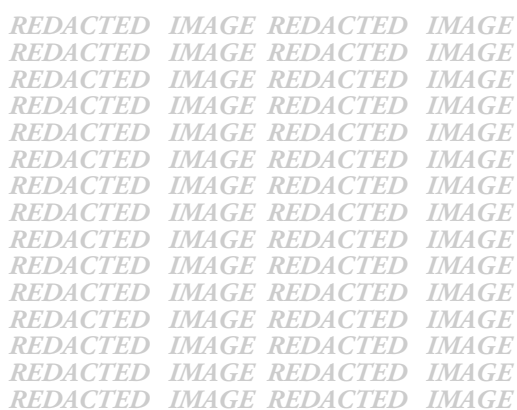
Figure 29. Breer, *Form Phases IV*, (2 stills).

Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) also argues that cinema became a new opening for associative meaning and the interplay of conventions, from a perspective that celebrates the divergent conventions of form, stating that the form itself, the ‘consecutive fact of film allows for everything!’ and to this one might add the complicating significance of its photographic basis (discussed further in relation to Breer’s *Eyewash*, 1959, Chapter 5). Recognizing its substantial differences, Breer (Coté,

⁶⁶ A gesture at once evocative of the abstract grid and in defiance of its scienticism, as well as a refutation within painting for Arp of expressionist’s egotism. (Foster et al., 2004, p.137)

1962, p.18) revives the questions of abstraction, which increasingly allow him to express a candid and anecdotal relation to form, as when he notes that, ‘in my canvasses, I used to make rectangles dance around, like ballet dancers, because of the strict relationships I imposed on them’. Adding, though, that his ‘ballerinas became elephants’ when the stability of the formal relationships and the taut ‘fixity’ of their configurations in a single painting were transformed, not only in the (motionless) iterations and variations on a theme across a series of images, but also by being taken up within the moving-image, which begins to play across the body of his work, in phases, as they were first transposed and documented in film.

The intervention of the camera, the presentation (or illusion) of motion and especially whatever was in motion was felt to quite literally destroy the thematic continuity and stability of these geometric relationships, necessitating a momentous counter-movement. Indeed, for Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) ‘the consecutive fact’ of film heralded a representational opening that also translated into, as suggested earlier, an ‘all-over active screen’ specifying that he ‘could play with the agitation itself in dosages, rather than try to think in terms of static compositions in which elements move’. (Macdonald, 1992, p.20) Furthermore, giving a sense of the scale of the shift needed for him at this moment, Breer (p.20) recalls, ‘You know, the usual opening shot of a conventional film, the helicopter shot of a car going down a highway seen from above – you watch that car. It’s a tiny dot on a huge screen, but you’re glued to that one thing and everything else is peripheral.’ The limited dynamics of the rectangle, circle, and other soft-geometric forms became a constraint whose integral necessity had been wholly problematized for Breer. And the orthodoxy of art in pursuit of an abstraction of ‘absolute formal values’ became increasingly untenable for Breer, (Coté, 1962, pp.17, 19) as he turned more directly to the machinery of film,



collage and everyday found objects for liberation, noting that ‘in the new use of cinema, blood is red, and red is red, and the confusion is possible and right’.

Figure 30. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

While Breer’s (Macdonald, 1992, p.34) criticism of reductive abstraction is integral to his work, he nevertheless builds upon the

critique within abstraction of traditional perceptual hierarchies and this informs his analysis of conventional narrative cinema, as when he recalls that he had developed, (pushing past Richter’s sense of the unity in contrasts), a principle of editing based upon *discontinuity*, or *anti-continuity*,

cutting on the basis of the interior feel of the shot rather than on either the plastic or the rational explanation of the sequence. [...] When you're disrupting the narrative expectations of the audience, you've got to do it in a way that makes interior sense of some kind. It was a matter of making a structure that had consecutive form, where one thing certainly led to the next, but where the specifics were chosen in ways other than story. You might go from a light frame with a lot of angular action to a lush dark one with rather static images as a matter of counterpoint. In a sense you build expectations and you've got to make good on them in the terms you finally set up. [...] The sense of motion is the issue here. That idea seems hard to defend, because our locomotion drives us forward with our face looking forward toward new things.

But it is paradoxically, also important to reiterate that for Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.39) the abstract animations and collage films that came out of this process were still felt, by him, to be in the same spirit as the abstract paintings, to the extent that they continue to be concerned with 'distilling the essence of the medium' which is then elaborated more specifically in terms of 'attitudes to the material' (Breer, 1974, p.35) creating structural-concepts that underpinned, and are in play with aesthetic and perceptual conventions. Breer (1973, p.39) discusses how for him, 'film was another medium that *permitted* mixing all this other extraneous stuff, ideas and words and configurative elements that I couldn't justify putting in paintings anymore, and I was sort of trying to come to terms with conventional cinema as opposed to film, but still very basically, abstract, you know examining the material, what was possible in film.'

As demonstrated in *Form Phases IV*, 1954 the exploration of spatial dynamics of early graphic cinema and particularly the meditation on the filmic frame within Richter's *Rhythmus 21* is a significant reference, as when Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) discusses how 'the first time I was making films, the idea was that I could accept film on the basis that the screen was a flat plane. And that was a painting discipline brought over to film. It was a flat plane on which things took place as they do on paintings, the whole neo-plastic ideal, which came out of cubism [...] concentration, awareness, and even a heightened use of the picture plane'. While the later debates about the 'limits of abstraction' become framed in terms of the sense of abstraction's ultimate exhaustion, for Breer it was the liminal space in which he is totally absorbed, and the often charming, chimeric glimpses of figuration in this work is neither a total abandon of abstract principles nor undoubtedly is it part of a perceived reactionary 'return to order'.



Figure 31. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Given Breer's (Macdonald, 1992, p.19) admission that he came to have an 'aversion to just purely abstract films' or that he (Coté, 1962, p.17) doesn't 'entirely believe in abstract films,' when such sentiments are considered in view of the potentially ironic direction that *Form Phases IV* takes its abstraction, there is, even so, little evidence

of any deep-seated enmity to the legacy of absolute film.

Rather the film's tone is suffused with lyrical humor, as Breer comes to grapple in a (pre-pop) mode with the 'conventions' of abstraction in a new relation, poised between questions of art and life processes. With the neo-avant-garde a renewed impression of subject matter is hauled, as O'Doherty (1973, p.193), suggests, 'into an area of aesthetic discourse that mimicked the issues of abstraction'. In other words, the fundamental principles and syntax of painting or by extension the structuration of film and the formal analysis of its elements, as in Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, become the central impression of its subject matter. Conversely, and this is evident in Breer's approach to abstraction and figuration within films, the focus upon *meaning*, which typically centers on figurative or representational content, is no longer assumed to be sufficiently readable in-itself, and becomes often peripheral, or ascertained in an association with the syntax of the work.

Johnston (1990, p.91) suggests that in the early moment in which modernism and postmodernism are barely distinguishable, 'What does it mean?' is superseded by 'asignifying semiotic regimes and assemblages'. The latter raises the question, 'What new intensities does it produce?' which takes the logic of deterritorialization already at work within modernism but refuses the personalization of abstraction in terms of a reterritorialization by the iconology of the symbol. This might be the initial impression of the film *Recreation*, 1956, to the extent to which Breer grapples with the multivalent and depleted signifiers of a diverse array of ephemera and found-objects within his cinematic collage in a similar way that is apparent within Rauschenberg's pedestrian paintings, such as, *Rebus*, 1956.



Figure 32. Breer, *Form Phases IV*, (2 stills).

The earlier film *Form Phases IV*, 1954 despite its basis in geometric abstraction is, however, also a dynamic interplay and layering of forms, with divergent approaches to the material itself that conjure tangential, unfettered associations as quickly as they are dispelled and scatter, giving an underlying sense not of abstract absolutes, but of image dissociation. This includes amongst other things; (paper) cut-outs and the simultaneous activation of the cut-out's negative space, (Figure 22-32) as well as the sporadic activation of the broader field of the ground, such as with the scrolling *screen tone* bar creating an optical moiré pattern⁶⁷ (Figure 26), or conversely in the allusion to the film frame and screen which collapses into something more akin to a cut-out mobile garland (Figure 31), the pleasingly clunky action of mis-traced outlines, or 'floating lines' (Figure 27). The unpredictability of dotted direction lines are reminiscent of both animated documentary segments of transit routes, (Figure 29) or the dotted sight-lines of early cartoons such as Felix the Cat, (Chapter 6, Figure 86, 90). Spinning forms and objects such as arrows, along with other misaligned and soft-geometric shapes, innervate in multiple directions suggesting an expansion of the frame and in other sequences an abstract figure becomes a car, boat, as well as a female figure, or even, comic speech bubbles (Figure 32, 22).

These bold impelling devices, ('cubist tricks' mentioned previously) and other fleeting references to the strategies of abstraction devolve into frolicsome interactions that are set up within sequences of puzzlements and play out loosely in phases, as the title suggests. Apposite to both Breer's *Untitled* painting (Figure 13) and the film *Form Phases IV*, are the perceived entrenchment of tensions during the period, suggested when Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.158) describes manipulation of the image surface, and how, 'It was considered a weakness in painting if there was any suggestion of elastic space. Usually, the space had to be very concrete, very tied down to

⁶⁷ (labor-saving device of pre-printed lines and textures on acetate once used chiefly by commercial graphic designers)

the frame, tied to one another and so forth. In my case, I introduced a floating line, quite deliberately. I don't pretend it was a great aesthetic breakthrough because in a sense it was going backward in terms of pure plastic'. (Figure 27)

Contrary, to the reputation of the abstraction within the *Form Phases* films as having 'austere geometries' (Hoberman, 1980, p.48) what is often not remarked upon is the vibrantly idiosyncratic character of the competing forms in pursuit, and the disturbance or congruence caused by their contact, containment, escape, and diversion. The phases are either interrupted or undergo rapid transformation, while aspects of the image - shape, color, movement, and graphic modes of editing - are revisited, but in an altered fashion. The awareness of repetition gives the sense that Breer is engaging if not in a form of distancing then certainly with discontinuities. This is even as the reappearance of elements imparts a sense of the work's digressive unity, that, one might also hazard, intimates another aspect of neoplasticism and serial art with its intentionally nonhierarchical integration and juxtaposition of forms.

Breer's approach, as has been argued, is not *acutely* tied to the way absolute film aspires to the nonrepresentational condition of music, or more fundamentally the idealism often associated with e.g. the elementarization of forms to found a 'universal plastic language'.⁶⁸ Yet, the way in which *Form Phases IV* contributes to the advancement of questions of a medium's duration and temporality has resonance with Richter's *Rhythmus 21*, but at the same time revels in the more characteristically Dadaist flair for disjunctive humor and improvisation, as well as the presentation of the mechanisms of chance. Breer's counter-intuitive emphasis consistently reads the abstraction in his films within the painterly debates of his times, with the contention to re-frame and reopen aspects of the non-/representational debates and the problematic of the expressive and concrete aspects of the ostensibly non-objective image.

Breer's films, likewise, can be situated within the dialogue between new ways of thinking about both painting and the composition of music, exemplified by Feldman. Feldman (1985, p.120) argues in 'More Light' that Cage, like Monet's concern with light fluctuation presents a 'startling *objectivity* towards musical phenomena'. This is based on the capacity of works and the ideas contained within them to expand and transform by embracing contingent events and aleatory changes in a way that resists evaluations based upon more traditionally biased hierarchies that miss the potential force of these unpredictable factors.

With this shift in priorities, Feldman (1985, p.121) continues, 'what I am suggesting is not that music should explore or imitate the resources of painting, but that the chronological aspect of

⁶⁸ (Bois, 1990, pp.102-3)

music's development is perhaps over, and that a new *mainstream* of diversity, invention, and imagination is awakening.' In 'Crippled Symmetry' Feldman (1985, p.136) situates his own composition within the 'gap between art and life' suggested by Rauschenberg's work, as well as translating Pollock's *allover* attitude toward the 'time-canvas',

I then began to compose a music dealing precisely with 'inbetween-ness': creating a confusion of material and construction, and a fusion of method and application, by concentrating on how they could be directed toward 'that which is difficult to categorize'. [...] I put sheets of graph paper on the wall; each sheet framed the same time duration and was in effect, a visual rhythmic structure.

While differently employed, Breer consistently advocates affinities with these two frameworks, the sense of inbetween-ness, which encourages an interrogative form of reading and a non-hierarchical *allover* sensibility within his work. Although his first *Form Phases* I-IV films (1952-54) are silent, there are, especially in *Form Phases IV*, visual reverberations with the discordant and converging, iterative phases of musical composition, and arguably relate to Feldman's (1985, p.212) emphasis upon two prevalent characteristics of the twentieth century: change or variation, and repetition or differential reiteration.

In later works Breer develops his own strong sense of acoustic composition utilizing ordinary and commonplace noises in the soundscapes of his later films, (after the surreal-esque breakneck oration written and voiced by Burch in *Recreation*, 1956). But unlike the abstract impetus to the non-representational condition of music, Breer's use of the familiar ambiance of everyday sounds, as non-narrative sound-effects, and the distortion of such sounds in free-association or displacement through timing and optical context is key as he strongly pits and subverts audio-visual expectations between the two tracks.

Characteristic of his later work, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, pp.41, 53) discusses the consequence of utilizing a phono-graphic style, with field recordings obtained from his often variable, low-key and make-shift working conditions in, for example, a studio space, home, or hotel room, 'I work in strange little rooms and places, I like to do that... to get myself a room some place and close the door' adding later, 'my sound often has special qualities because it's recorded in the room where windows are open, and you hear airplanes or other things. Some of the sounds are made by hanging the microphone out of the window, and there are accidents that I use all the time.'

And while his interest in music undoubtedly has a non-technical, and metaphorical resonance with contrapuntal dissonance as exemplified by, for instance, the citing of Charles Ives, an early American modernist composer of polytonal music, Breer (Moore, 1980, pp.9,11) nevertheless

also affiliates the processes of his work at this level, more liberally, with alogical improvisation that is ‘direct and bald and real’: ‘I think these things are implicit and do get understood. We never know how much gets understood in a work of art, we don’t know what pore it goes in. But the reason I understand Ives is not because I’ve ever studied music. It’s because it comes through at another level.’

While resonant with Feldman’s appreciation for an inventive approach to composition, this sense of improvisation is deep-seated within Breer’s artistic process, and in keeping with his self-taught approach to animation and film, based upon a rejection of conventional training, or more particularly, the technical-ideological suppositions in which it has been largely entrenched. Breer’s (Macdonald, 1992, p.31) work and assertions toward the medium *differential-specificity* (Krauss, 1999a, pp.44, 53) of film foregrounds the difficulties of formally translating aspects of the discourse of abstract painting into film, as well as, the conditional reasons for doing this in the first place, as quoted earlier; ‘The gap between the legitimacy of painting and of film art was so wide that I couldn’t help openly challenge it.’

Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.159) discusses how within the arena of artist film, ‘the tradition of avant-garde cinema was *un peu desséchée* at that time, no one had been working in it much since the 1930s.’ He recounts with candid enthusiasm showing his early films, which likely included the *Form Phases* series and *Recreation* to Duchamp in 1956 and later Man Ray, as well as screening his work within the ‘usual pretentious historical arrangement whereby I would be included with all the previous great filmmakers’ (Beauvais, 2006, p.161);

... after he [Duchamp] saw my films he said: ‘We used to play around like that.’ But he said, confidentially to me in a low voice: ‘Don’t you think they are a little bit too fast?’ And I love that. [...] A lot of things that I thought were new were not new. They had already done all that stuff. I know it’s different but still it was a good experience for me not to be so arrogant. [...] In those days most people had forgotten or hadn’t seen these films in a long time. There was the usual Richter, Eggeling, Léger probably, and Man Ray and Duchamp. (pp.160-61)

In this light, Breer’s preoccupation with thresholds can be delineated by the broader shifts that are captured in *Form Phases IV*, 1954. Returning to Sitney’s manoeuvre that focuses upon expressive perceptual *thresholds*, it has been important to draw attention back to Breer’s neo-avant-garde concern with conventions and the subversion of categorization, across various mediums in the spirited reconfiguration of geometric and lyrical abstraction, incorporating intrusions from outside the frame, and increasingly the impact of the photographic itself. It is important to emphasize how the rigorous formal concerns in abstraction associated with Breer’s

Form Phases series refract more broadly the way that art had become in the 1950s intensively ‘contaminated’ and invigorated by popular culture and the aesthetics of the everyday (which is further embodied in the film *Recreation*, 1956, Chapter 4). Implicated within the refraction of this trajectory is the intensification of the capitalist form and the way in which aspects of the everyday and the notion of essential nature become increasingly usurped by the recursive lens of commodification and culture. This section has aimed to recapture how Breer’s preoccupations are transformed further and culminate in *Recreation*, as Sillars (2011, p.28) argues, becoming ‘one of the most sophisticated summaries and anticipations of the many struggles, and resolutions, between representation and abstraction over the last century’.

CHAPTER 2

Attitudes to Geometric Abstraction in Op-Art and Kineticism⁶⁹ in the Le Mouvement exhibition, 1955



Breer's Neo-dada film Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York, 1960 Recovering the Implications of Film in Le Mouvement, 2010

This section will reconsider the bearings of Breer's engagement with geometric abstraction at Galerie Denise René. With its increasing academisation during the 1950s, the neoclassical construal of geometric abstraction becomes promulgated as a kind of palliative 'return to order', which Bois (Foster et al., 2004, p.418) argues is entirely at odds, for instance, with Mondrian's own 'realist' conception of abstraction, or, for that matter, with the disputes associated with the materiality (or materialist-idealism) of Russian constructivism (Taitin, Malevich etc.). Even so, the crucial 'destructive-constructive' quality of *dynamic equilibrium* explored by Mondrian's (1987d, p.294) neoplasticism, and expounded in 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art' (1936) is included in the publication promoting this latter 'constructivist' abstraction, *Circle: An International Survey of Constructive Art* (1937). Yet facing this turning tide, Mondrian includes a rejoinder to the growing neoclassical and ornamental versions of abstraction along with the growing effect of more figurative impulses. One might consider how these concerns which were pervasive, and which Mondrian cites with disapproval, nonetheless innervate the discourse surrounding Breer's *Form Phases IV*,

Many neglect the real non-figurative art, [...] and ask themselves whether the time has not arrived 'to integrate form and content' or 'to unify thought and form.' But one should not blame non-figurative art for that which is only due to the ignorance of its very content. If the form is without content, without universal thought, it is the fault of the artist. Ignoring that fact, one imagines that figuration, subject, particular form, could add to the work that which the plastic itself is lacking. (Mondrian, 1987d, p.298)

Nevertheless, the debates and exchange at Galerie Denise René reignited the critical discourse and reception of the possibilities opened up by abstraction for a new generation within postwar

⁶⁹ Barrett (1990, p.221) argues that in kinetic art, movement is of a primary and integral concern, as opposed to the representation of movement, this includes, works that move, the movement of the viewer, or movement by the viewer of work such as in some interactive art, as well as spatial dynamics, e.g. participatory perambulation. While a changing sculptural use of light is considered relevant, Barrett differentiates film that does not effectively operate in an installation context, e.g. early abstract film, he suggests is based upon different principles.

Europe.⁷⁰ By the early 1950s, dissension was growing in various directions as evident in *Le Mouvement* exhibition, 1955,⁷¹ and the accompanying pamphlet, *Yellow Manifesto*⁷² named after Vasaréy's text (the only artists' contribution to be included). It was chiefly curated by Denise René, Hultén, Bordier, and Vasaréy. This caused consternation in the others involved especially

Soto, Agam, Bury and Tinguely, as it appeared to give Vasaréy and his position precedence.

Figure 33. Breer & Hultén, *Le Mouvement*, 1955, film & exhibition photodocumentation includes: Breer, *Image by Images*, 1955, flip-book, third row down on the right.

In 'Notes for a Manifesto,' Vasaréy (1996, p.111) makes central the activation of the artwork in a dynamic with the viewer's apprehension, and 'displacement of the spectator's point of view'. It can be argued the exhibition attempts to approach the avant-garde problematic of questioning the authority of the artist, and centrality of artistic self-expression in traditional art, along with the objecthood and primacy of the original image-object. It does this by spatio-temporally extending the site of the artwork directly into the problematics of perception, the picture-plane or screen, technical reproduction, and the duration of art in the event. For Vasaréy this is underpinned by a utopic sense of the possibilities of the democratization of art

and is imbued with a certain inclusive optimism toward new materials, emergent and non-art technology e.g. slide projection as artwork, the technical reproduction of *multiples*, and networks of dissemination. In 'Notes for a Manifesto', 1955, Vasaréy (1996, pp.111-12) asserts,

⁷⁰ Along with the 1949 landmark exhibit *First Masters of Abstraction* (curated by Seuphor). But it should be added that Mondrian's first solo show in Paris was held much later at Galerie Denise René in 1957.

⁷¹ Image Source: (Wetzel, 2010, p.146)

⁷² Vasaréy's contribution was entitled 'Notes for a Manifesto'; and the pamphlet included texts by Hultén and Bordier.

Indeed, we cannot indefinitely leave the work of art's enjoyment to the elite of connoisseurs. The art of today is headed towards generous forms, hopefully repeatable; the art of tomorrow will be common treasure or it will not be. [...] If the idea of the plastic work resided before in an artisanal process and in the myth of the 'unique piece', *it is rediscovered today in the conception of possible RECREATION, MULTIPLICATION, and EXPANSION.*

This particular attitude toward the democratization of art, which remains popular today, however, is strongly condemned by Foster et al., (2004, p.420) as an oversimplification, ultimately 'contributing to a nauseating saturation of the market'. In terms of the range of Kineticism's intention, and significant for Breer is the less optimistic and discordant *neo-dadaism* of Tinguely's perpetual motion machines, with the ironic gesture of 'perpetual change' generated by his Meta-Mechanical structures, or Meta-Malevich reliefs.⁷³ Tinguely is remembered most for the spectacular auto-destructive sculpture, *Homage to New York*, 1960 that presented a potentially critical postwar attitude towards the techno-scientific prospects of 1950s societies under the shadow of mutually assured destruction, and was a signatory to the collective neo-avant-gardist New Realism manifesto, 1960. In this manifesto, Restany (1992, p.711) writes of the exhaustion of the monopoly and hierarchies of established vocabularies, languages, and styles in art e.g. of approaches within the traditionally predominant fields of painting and sculpture,

What do we propose instead? The passionate adventure of the real perceived in itself and not through the prism of conceptual or imaginative transcription. [...] Sociology comes to assistance of consciousness and of chance, whether this be at the level of choice or of the tearing up of posters, of the allure of an object, of the household rubbish or the scraps of the dining-room, of the unleashing of mechanical susceptibility, of the diffusion of sensibility beyond the limits of its perception. All of these initiatives (there are some, and there will be others) abolish the excessive distance created by categorial understanding between general, objective contingency, and urgent individual expression. [...] We are thus bathed in direct expressivity up to our necks, at forty degrees above the Dada zero, without aggressiveness, without a downright polemical intent, without any other justificatory itch than our realism.

And it is with the focus of this neo-dada lens, that Breer's films can be considered. *Homage* to Tinguely's *Homage*, for instance, revels in the collision of values, and endeavours to reframe art's categories and cultural ideals with the vital intrusion of life, in a cycle of creative destruction, and by the homage of its negative affirmation.

⁷³ which e.g. subverts Malevich's materialist-idealisms or unity of vision and 'pure feeling' sought in the aerial-like Supremacism



Figure 34. Tinguely, *Broadsheet for Homage to New York*, 1960, and opening shot in: Breer, *Homage to Tinguely's Homage*, 1960.

Breer's film *Homage*⁷⁴ is unusual within his practice, because it utilizes live-action documentation, along with brief animated photo-collage sections, and a hand-drawn sequence of squiggly brushmarks on live-action shot either from Tinguely's live-event, *Homage to New York*, at the Sculpture Garden, MoMA, also known as *The Machine*

that Destroys Itself, or from the construction of the sculpture inside the Geodisic Rigid Radome of the adjacent Buckminster Fuller exhibition (1959-1960). This consisted of three structures, and beside the plastic dome mentioned, a space-frame Octet Truss, and Tensegrity mast, using unconventional building methods and novel materials such as aluminum anodized gold and monel, presenting a very different vision, and demonstrating the 'revolutionary principles' of building construction within Fuller's aspirational tenet, 'more and more of everything, for everybody, from less and less resources.' (MoMA Library, 1959, p.1)

Tinguely's *Homage* by contrast was constructed from bicycle and pram wheels, pulley wheels and rope, motor parts, one of his unraveling drawing-writing scroll Méta-matic machines, a playing piano, the clamor of an augmented Addressograph, a runaway cart, a fume exuding bathtub or bassinet, metal cans, cable drums amongst other collected bits of junk from dumpsites, the open storefront and vendors of Canal Street, and a surplus store. For the timed means of electrical and mechanical semi-autonomous 'destruction of the machine', Tinguely enlisted Klüver's assistance who went on to co-found Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.) in 1966, that sought to integrate art and technology and facilitate collaborations between artists and engineers. Rauschenberg contributed a 'money-thrower,' built out of centrifugally sprung coils and a converted toaster that flung out silver dollar coins. (Tomkins, 1962, p.44) The objects were variously connected, much of it welded together in a blaze of sparks, and finally painted a stark white, all of which is said to have taken roughly three weeks. Klüver (2000, p.2) notes that during the event, 'Breer's task was to pour titanium tetrachloride into it. The combination of ammonia and titanium chloride produces, as you all know, white... in this case white smoke which poured out of the bassinet, until it finally engulfed the specially invited, elegantly dressed audience.'

⁷⁴ Image Source: (Tinguely, 2013)

The staging of the kinetic sculpture for a select audience, with some dignitaries and patrons in Black-tie, courted disaster with its sporadic ‘breakdowns,’ such as, the inflation of a weather balloon, which instead of bursting begins to sag, the melody of the piano which is accidentally set-alight is reduced to a few sad repeating notes, or crashing bottles which release their odiferous liquids, the smell of which is said to have lingered for days. But far from being scandalized by the fiasco of the situation, one culturati in Pennebaker’s film, *Breaking it Up at the Museum*, 1960, reflects on the event’s popularity, and in appreciation of the avant-garde generally states: ‘it felt like being in the 1920s again, very amusing’.⁷⁵



Figure 35. Breer, *Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to NY*, 1960, (9.5min, 16mm, black & white, 2stills).

Brought full circle from the scrapheap, the sculpture, *Homage*, culminates in the flames of its own destruction, under the watchful eye of nearby fire extinguishers, and is brought down in a smoldering collapsed heap after 27 minutes. Despite Klüver’s assertion in ‘The Garden Party’ that the work is not a protest, it nevertheless evokes at some level a nascent critique of the new consumerist society, with the object at its core in a relation to ruin and wreckage. Tinguely’s work also entails a transformation of ‘public’ space, and spectacle culture. This and Tinguely’s aptitude for self-promotion, is construed as compliticious by Lee (2006, p.134), ‘For what could be more American than a machine that consumes itself as entertainment or an art that takes novelty as its first and no doubt, last principle?’ Yet, this spectacularization of the machinic situation, however, is read with optimism by Klüver (1968, p.171) when he argues that the ephemerality of the event produces an active reception, ‘it forces us out of an inherited image and into contact with ever-changing reality’ adding that it has ‘rejected itself and become humor and poetry... in a purely technocratic society the machine must always be a functional object. [...] It is when the machine must function at any cost that there can be no *Homage to New York*.’ This is likewise detailed in Nin’s (1966, p.284) diarized account of the event’s staged mayhem, when she suggests that its

⁷⁵ Criticized by the British art critic, David Sylvester, as ‘tuxedo dada’. (Tomkins, 1962, p.44)

loud perverse clatter presented an experience contrary to the rationalization of production-line systems, 'It's a mockery of the machine. [...] For Americans, who believe in and admire the efficiency of machines, these machines which fell apart, exploded, shook with Dadaist humor, produced a startling shock and gave them a feeling of sacrilege.'

Given these cues, it can be appreciated that Breer performs his own dadaesque and meta-mechanical critique on the paradoxical image of the artist that the figure of Tinguely presents (as a cutout, whose head levitates within the machine, Figure 35 left, and welding on the right). The centrality of the artist's relation, in terms of process and performance, to the themes of freedom, chaos and spontaneity that underpin destruction and creation becomes key. As Klüver (1968, p.171) exclaims, 'Tinguely became, 'part of the machine', effectively enlarging its scope, and 'supplied the energy to create freedom and was ruler over chaos. No distinction can be made between the 'random' elements, the accidents, or the controlled parts of the spectacle.'

The primary impression within the film is of a constructivist proletarian-style producer welding and engaged at one level in a mechanical means of (artistic) production and its fetishization. This is visibly set in contradiction to the highly regimented precision within assembly-line mass-

production that is captured and transformed, for instance, within the lesser-known early film of rapid jumpcuts, *Rhythm*, 1957 by Len Lye, obtained from documentary footage of machine-operatives at the Chrysler Corp. automobile plant.⁷⁶



Figure 36. Lye, *Rhythm*, 1957. (1min, 16mm, black & white).

The theater of Tinguely's kinetic sculpture in Breer's film is both playfully celebrated and at times mockingly redoubled, quizzically reflecting on the 1960s rehearsal of avant-garde strategies. By the use of intrusive satirical effects, such as jumpcuts, sped-up film, and superimposed shots overlaid intermittently with dissonant sounds, (obtained from the assemblage itself, such as the piano that was included, playing to its own demolition), Breer does not highlight a sense of world-weary pessimism, but rather the comic unmelodious tinkering quality of the work, which presents the incongruent success of its

⁷⁶ Lye (Horrocks, 2001, p.261) describes the 'empathetic' concern for motion and film's aim 'to kinetically convey the vitality and romanticism of efficient workers in their everyday jobs.' See also: 'The Art that Moves', 1964, Lye (2001). See by contrast sourced footage from: (Chrysler Corporation "Forward Look" Promotion Film, 1955).

unsystematic machinic failure.

In a manner corresponding to the random aspects of the event, the use of superimposition in footage that simultaneously displays the sculpture being built and already collapsing, enveloped by flames was by Breer's (Cummings, 1973, p.15) own account fortuitous. 'I had one glorious accident otherwise I wouldn't have ever put it together as a film and ever let it be seen. In excitement and nervousness the night of the opening of the thing, I cranked back the film through the camera and shot it so that it was double exposure – which I abhorred as an idea. I would never use double exposure consciously, but it was nice at times, and it saved the day because the footage I had was otherwise pedestrian, most of it was.' This immediately paradoxical sense that the work presents is of a spectacular striving and constructive impulse underpinned by discontentment, and the pleasure of seizing a risk, exposure, disintegration even,



's film *Homage*. This is glimpsed in the pinning yin-yang symbol (Figure 38).⁷⁷

37. *Tinguely, Œuf d'Onocrotale No.2*, 1958. x25cm, relief: metal elements on black n panel, motorized.)

s work is redolent of the non-ronous movement of white organic t shapes elevated against a black in Tinguely's earlier Méta-mechanical, such as, *Pelican Egg*, 1958, Figure 37, is in the continual process of cracking

Its conceptual suggestion is, rsely, that it will be perceptually put y back together again by the viewer. Breer's animated motion is not e or the mechanical fits and starts of gmented through attachments, such as,

clanking chains, pirouetting and jiggling feathers, rags etc. Breer is able to impart a simple and unassumingly emotive aspect to the quality of movement whose scope is at once melancholic as it begins to lose momentum and starts to fall apart only to be caught again on the upturn of its own axis, briskly picking up speed once more and distilling something of the film's own rhythm.

⁷⁷ Image Source: (Tinguely, 1958)

The delicateness of the broken-egg corkscrew mechanism becomes appropriated, and linked to the high-octane presentation of the artist, in an early photographically animated scene in Breer's *Homage* of Tinguely in a black-suit and tie, confidently poised, arms crossed, looking askance at the camera. His figure constructed as a cutout pop-up, is then flipped open to reveal his innards, and the chaotic mechanics for which he is renown, implying the problem of humanity's technologized 'second nature', and the New Realist case that nature itself is evermore mechanized. Seitz (1992a, p.60) in *Art in the Age of Aquarius*, sardonically observes of Tinguely's *Homage* event that, "Tinguely's appearance on the New York scene, under official auspices and with critical acclaim sufficiently seasoned by derogation to maintain an aura of controversy, was a fitting inauguration of the modernist sixties."

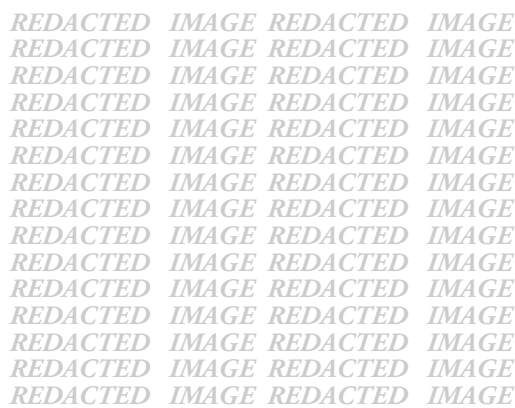


Figure 38. Breer, *Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to NY*, 1960, (4 stills).

Breer's film *Homage* precludes the expected cinematic exaggeration of the spectacle of destruction to present a nexus of images associated with the Duchampian theme of the 'human mechanism', a comment on individual creative autonomy and the ego which is directed cheekily at the 'aura' of the

artist and artwork, to more broadly recover its underlying absurdist attitude, with a gesture that is, in the main, parallel to Tinguely's. Delight in ambitious impracticable salvage constructions, and the perverse excitement of its conscious destruction that the live performance offers is released when the mechanism of *Homage* is set into motion, whose course and effects become, at a certain level, unforeseeable, in terms of its reception, reaching beyond the bounds of the artist's control, changing over time, and becoming *time-worn*, as Tinguely⁷⁸ argues, 'it was the freedom that belonged to its ephemeral aspect – ephemeral like life, you understand. It was the opposite of the cathedrals, the opposite of the skyscrapers around us, the opposite of the museum idea, the opposite of the petrification in a fixed work of art'.

This contrasts, for instance, with the 'precision' represented by the multimillion-pound campaign for the 2003 Honda Accord 'Cog' ad, accused of plagiarizing Swiss artists Fischli and Weiss' take on a Rube Goldberg (US)/Heath Robinson (UK) style apparatus, comprised of a DIY assemblage of things ready-to-hand, in an exceedingly complicated but meticulous chain reaction of events captured in the film, 'The Way Things Go' (1987). It would seem, nevertheless, that the

⁷⁸ Extract of unpublished interview with Tinguely for Tomkins (1962, pp.44-46) reproduced in (Landy, 2009, p.3).

core of Debord's (1983, p. Theses #192) criticism continues to reverberate, as when he argues, that the 'point is to advertise reconciliation with the dominant state of affairs[...] the most modern tendency of spectacular culture – and the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society – seeks to remake, by means of 'team projects', a complex neo-artistic environment made up of decomposed elements: notably in urbanism's attempts to integrate artistic debris or esthetico-technical hybrids. This is an expression, on the level of spectacular pseudo-culture, of developed capitalism's general project, which aims to recapture the fragmented worker as a 'personality well integrated in the group[...]. It is the same project everywhere: *a restructuring without community*.'

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Le Mouvement: From Cinema to Kinetics, 2010 exhibition
 & back to the problematic of the neo-avant-garde

Returning again to the earlier moment in Kineticism, and the exhibition of *Le Mouvement*, 1955, Bordier's (2010, p.34) contribution to the *Yellow manifesto* pamphlet identifies for the exhibition an overarching theme of 'the transformable work' – these are works which undergo transformation through an integral sense of duration, or are activated by the semblance of movement, and its conceptual interplay. Brought together are diverse references identifying antecedents in the cross-disciplinary engagements of artists associated with Futurism, Russian Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus, as well as, the abstract or Absolute films of the 1920s. Affiliations are found in earlier works by Duchamp, Eggeling, Fischinger, Lye, McLaren, Moholy-Nagy, Gabo, Man Ray etc. with the 'new tendency' that announces the bifurcating innovations of the impression of surface movement, flicker and moiré patterns in the Op-art of Vasarély and Soto, along with Kineticism in the mechanical movement of Tinguely's sculptures, and, with Calder's mobiles the consideration of space and natural movement. Also important to emphasize here, as it is less prominently situated in the exhibition or surrounding literature, is Breer's engagement with cinematic and pre-cinematic forms, including the accompanying flip-book *Image by Images* (Figure 33) and his films, *Un Miracle*, and *Form Phases IV* from 1954, which Breer (Wetzel, 2010, p.149) mentions were included in an accompanying screening.

However, even as the exhibit ambitiously aimed to link movement and abstraction in order to launch the new 'ism' of kinetics, and included voluble plaudits for a program of abstract films, it was in effect, as Breer comments, still tangentially relegated 'to that one night showing at the Cinémathèque française' (Wetzel, 2010, p.148). Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.4) maintained earlier, that 'Denise René wanted to bring us in but Vasarély was always trying to be in charge. Power, you

know... So when somebody mentioned film, he said “Oh, I’m going to make films”. He never made one, but he always said he was making one. So that showed all the artists who felt threatened by movement, who came together to make this show. I’d been making films already for a couple of years but they didn’t recognize film as a serious medium.’ This is further exacerbated by *Le Mouvement II*, New York, 1975 and the accompanying English version of the exhibition catalogue, on which Breer (Wetzel, 2010, p.150) comments with distaste on the trivial artworld revisionism protracting previous disputes over who originated Kineticism, amidst the even more glaring continuance of the marginalization of his filmic works, ‘Ironically, I don’t think the art world by 1975 was that much interested in who was first doing what. [...] I am mentioned once as part of a short apology for the absence of film in the exhibition *Le Mouvement*. Film was then and for many years excluded from “fine art,” as you know.’

Despite the new visibility of artists’ films, and renewed interest in films of the historical avant-garde within the field of art and its history, as Uroskie (2014, p.87) notes, ‘it is telling that the artist at Galerie Denise René most actively involved in pursuing this intersection of cinema and the plastic arts... Breer - would be almost entirely forgotten by the art historical literature.’ This continues, in part, because despite the ‘expanded’ aspirations of the manifesto, the distinguishing sense of the exhibit is, to a degree, still categorically ensconced within the disciplinary perspectives of setting Painting and Sculpture into motion. The approaches that some of the works present in the exhibit are accompanied by reservations, for instance, in the October survey *Art Since 1900* (Foster et al., 2004, p.418) over the underlying integrity or gimmickry and gadgetry of some of its modes of attention, such as, ‘retinal titillation’ and its early, so-called ‘interactivity’.

Nevertheless, the reverberations of this landmark exhibition continue and in 2010 it was revisited as *Le Mouvement: From Cinema to Kinetics* at the Museum Tinguely, Basel, contributing to the wave of renewed interest in this juncture, and reopening the relation of abstract cinema to Kineticism as the title suggests. But when asked about the significance of ‘Kineticism’ for his own filmic practice, Breer (Wetzel, 2010, p.149) alludes to the rather belated, unduly categorial sequestering of his work. It is entirely understandable that Breer comes to argue, ‘I avoided categorizing my own work preferring to think of it as based on my personal background of automobiles and airplanes... I have to suppose that most artists want to play outside of any categories – unless they invented them. By the way, Schwitters denouncing fascism at a Nazi party for Italian futurists and being obliged to flee Germany gives another view of Kineticism and categories as such.’⁷⁹

⁷⁹ For historical account see: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1950, pp.99; 97-103) (Cardinal & Webster, 2011, p.26)

*Refunctioning Film in Breer's Pre-Cinematic (& post-Conceptual) Objects
& the Auratic Return in FILM, 2011 by Tacita Dean*

Mekas: It was done on cards?

Breer: I was analyzing the construction of the film. That's part of my idea about concreteness and exposing the materials of film itself...

(Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.47)

Parallel to staging degrees of aesthetic distance (associated with the legacy of the *readymade*) is, conversely, the proximity and density with which Breer (Cummings, 1973, pp.10-11) begins to investigate the processes and conventions of looking at the filmic image, stating, 'I wanted to make objects that embodied the same history as film'. Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.4) discusses the development of turning to pre-cinematic devices, that enabled him to refunction aspects of various discourses within the art gallery context,

[illegible]

My idea was that I wanted to simplify, I wanted to go back before the apparatus of cinema and get to the earliest exploitation of persistency. This is the idea behind the flipbook or the mutoscope, which is a continuous flipbook. I thought that the image could be changed into an object that would make a unity of the whole thing [...]. It was a popular toy and I wanted to transform it into a functioning kinetic object I guess (I hate that word). And the readymade is part of it.⁸⁰

Figure 39. Breer, *3D-Mutoscope*, 1978-1980, (rotary hand-cranked index-cards, & mounted viewer. 20.5x56x23cm).

⁸⁰ Image Source: (Breer, 1978-80)

The concern with the processes and conventions of looking is played out, not only in his interrogation of the absolute films of the historical avant-garde, but also by turning his attention to the 'low arts' of early popular animation, and pre-cinematic devices, laying bare the underlying mechanics of its pleasures. Breer (Levine, 1973, p.13) cites two main compositional differences that the mutoscope presented in comparison to a 'flipbook or a movie, you had a loop situation all of a sudden' which demanded 'something that had no beginning or end. You could crank all day long.' The second being the 'physicality of an exposed mutoscope where you see all the cards.' Breer describes how he began to use plastic cards for durability, then began changing the shape of the card itself, punching holes, sculpting divits on the side, and using transparent plastic, 'I began treating them as a kind of sculptural object [...] a kind of three-dimensional movie.' Breer adds that the 'excitement' had to do with simultaneously seeing the machine', and 'what goes into the making of this image you're getting' where the individual cards are visible, and in the case of clear plastic cards, its superimposition is laid bare, before it begins to flow 'into this recreated image, when you flip it.' (p.13)

One might consider Breer's cinematic objects in the subsequent context of a long revival of predominantly outmoded technology in contemporary art, such as, the use of the snapshot and slide projection etc. and, for instance, Tacita Dean's use of 35mm film techniques in the installation, *FILM*, 2011 which will be discussed shortly. Breer has also been considered in the lineage, as Uroskie (2014, pp.85-110) stresses, of Duchamps' interest in optics and motion as presented in the mid-1920s *Rotorelief* works. These are lithographic discs whose image is designed as animated loops to play on a vertically positioned gramophone-like motor (which was, in the mid-1930s, intended to be sold as *Rotorelief (Disc Optiques)* on the contemporaneous technology of Victrola gramophones). The *Rotoreliefs* utilize the optical illusion of pulsating depth associated with the kinetics of the spiralling graphics, while other discs incorporated puns in spirals but which remained flat rotations on the disc surface.

This aspect of Breer's work in relation to such a lineage is often overlooked, if the status and mediation of the technological form he utilizes is not accounted for. This is particularly so when Breer is considered predominantly in the discourse and discipline of animation, or from the perspective taken by retro-modernism popular in current artists' films. Such standpoints tend to avoid the ways in which Breer conceptualizes form, and reflects on the complex and contradictory historicity and disputes of traditional forms such as abstraction in painting and (kinetic) sculpture within his works as has been explored in relation to the *Form Phases IV* and *Eyemash* (in Chapter 1, and 6 respectively).

Before expanding the framework of Breer's practice, it is important to note the undervaluation of animation-film that has tended to accompany any consideration of Breer's work within the sphere of art. Uroskie, for instance, gives a prudent prominence to Breer's process and pre-cinematic objects through a direct correlation with the legacy of Duchamps' *Rotoreliefs*. However, in order to revalue the prominence Breer gives to animation-film itself, it becomes vital to develop a nexus of contemporary concerns surrounding the utilization of the photographic image, technology and its conceptualization within the *postmedium condition* (Krauss). How Breer's work mediates the aesthetics of film through an exploration of its medium *differential-specificity* (Krauss, 1999a, p.56) becomes relevant for a contemporary context. These problematics are initially reflected upon by contrasting how it is raised by the recent exemplar of Dean's *FILM*, 2011, a Tate Modern commission for the Unilever Series, Turbine Hall, as well as touching on the 'cinematographic exhibition' of *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, 2002.

Important to contemporary discussions has been Krauss' (1999a, p.56) arguments surrounding the notion of the *postmedium condition*, in which she distinguishes a vitality that is attributed to the way in which artists do not retreat into 'etiolated forms of the traditional mediums' but have explored the conceptual hybridity of these media. In particular she contends that such artists have 'embraced the idea of differential specificity, which is to say the medium as such, which they understand they will have to reinvent or rearticulate.' A cursory glance at the reinvention of these predominantly outmoded forms, such as the utilization of slide-tape (in contrast to the ubiquity of digital presentation programs e.g. PowerPoint), (market display) light-boxes, hand-drawn animated film, the photo-novel, or film still, has little to do with the actual modification of older technology, nor is the work centred upon technical craft. For Krauss, rather, it has to do with the disruption of staid categories through fictional interventions, as well as, an intersection of conventions (from within and without of an art context) that reinvigorates this *self-differing* potential of mediums, and revolves upon the mediation of the medium. One example, as Krauss suggests, is the early photoconceptual work of Jeff Wall. It presents a conflation of the explicitly staged use of high-end film and photographic techniques, to create a vernacular that references the documentary, history-painting genres, as well as, art-historical paintings, which are then reproduced upon the advertising light-box.

The recourse to 'outmoded', often analogue, technology in much contemporary work, however, would seem to have become less about reinvention. It is not uncommon to find works where the use of the analogue is unproblematically framed by nostalgia and exclusivity, and clearly at pains to differentiate itself from the perceived mass-creativity associated with low-end digital media. Distinct from the more widely available and commonplace digital technology it has become part of a pursuit for what Osborne (2004, p.67) has described as 'more opaque, less immediately

received, artistic materials.’ In this fashion for rarefied technologies, artists’ also ostensibly ‘re-cover’ experimental film as tradition, along with ‘disused’ cinema techniques to a great extent framed, as in Dean’s work *FILM* as a moment of loss, historic and imminently bygone. These fairly current rehearsals in art have been humorously quipped as - the shock of the old. Nevertheless, the implications of such debates have also been considered, one might note, in *The Struggle for Film* written in the 1930s by Richter (1986, p.109), where he surmises that, ‘Because sound, color, 3D lead in present conditions only to a higher degree of vulgar naturalism, their artistic prospects are paralyzed, even rendered suspect. Hence the glorification of the silent cinema and its ‘limited’ technology. The tendency towards reproduction, towards vulgar naturalism, lies not in the machine, however, but in its users. In the last analysis, technology will be as progressive in its form as the spirit it has to express.’

One must question, for example, whether the prolonged condition of films’ imminent demise intrinsically politicizes the current use of the format as the polemics suggest in recent works, such as, Dean’s *FILM*, 2011. And whether the recent tendency within artists’ film attempting to *auratize* the filmic apparatus, can be understood as a critical supposition within these parameters also remains up for debate. This becomes particularly so, when its spectacle assumes a uniqueness of appearance, ‘a strange weave of space and time’ (Benjamin, 2008b, p.518) that encompasses an un-estranged accord of means between object, setting and subject, that does not also demand a critically reflexive mediation as part of the *work* of art. This notion will be briefly elaborated in relation to the recent auratization of modernist film, touching on the polemic surrounding Tacita Dean’s *FILM*, 2011 before exploring the optic of Breer’s work allied to the breakdown and leaps afforded by experimentation.

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Benjamin’s Critical Perspective on the Loss of the Aura

Benjamin describes Atget’s photographs, which forsake the traditional power of celebrated sights for the illumination of detail, which moreover evoke an indeterminate emptiness that is to a degree optical, but also existential and conceptual. Their significance is rooted, as Benjamin (2008b, pp.285-6) argues, in the way that such pictures ‘suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship.’ Benjamin continues, ‘The peeling away of the object’s shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense, for all that is the same in the world, has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness – by means of its reproduction.’ The event of technical reproducibility is allied to the penetrating vantage of the potentially *emancipating* ‘loss of the aura’ within objects, things, and the conditions of

existence, where the centrality of exchangeability becomes linked to the critique of the commodity form and culture within capitalism.⁸¹

For Benjamin extolling the depletion of the aura is associated with the critical elucidation of aspects of cinema, such as, the processes of framing, modes of (Brechtian) self-reflexive distanciation (unresolved tendencies, repetition, silence) and the dialecticizing of events, which dispense, in theory at least, with naturalism, and act as a critique of cinematic transparency and self-presence. Such aspects are linked to art's *exhibition value* (Benjamin) within a contested and yet potentially collective space. This is differentiated from art and mass-media objects that restore veneration of the aura through modes of transmission that induce authoritatively restrictive forms of spectatorship and subjectivation within (*contemplative*) *immersion*. The apparatus of mass-media, as well as the art-market, is compelled into the service of capitalist (mis)representations, a situation more akin to the perpetuation of *cult values* (Benjamin), and in which the photographic image is still felt to maintain aspects of the naturalizing mechanisms of myth (Barthes). Furthermore, positioning the viewer in terms of being held by the spell of (conformist) veneration of *given* forms is critiqued in the polemic of this framework as a depoliticized mode of art's reception, bound as it also is by the cultivation of bourgeois individualism, art as individual edification through the acquisition of cultural capital. Nevertheless, Benjamin does not lose sight of the transformative power, and potentially revolutionary energies which 'intoxication' can catalyze.

Reauratization of FILM, 2011 in Dean's Installation



Utilizing the Concept of Obsolescence and the Avant-garde's Refunctioning of Technology

In contrast to the cultural production of images in other forms such as 'magazines, books, billboards or television and the internet', where the focus is primarily on content and not upon the form or physicality, Dean (2011, p.23) proposes that 'Artists, on the other hand, care about the uniqueness and aura of their objects and their presence in the spaces they are shown in.' In this way the impact and success of *FILM*⁸² is largely felt to rely on the authenticity of its effects being uniquely tied to the physical procedures of filmmaking (the use of masks, hand-spliced editing etc.) that is not to be mistaken for the digital replication of such techniques. In *FILM* the

⁸¹ Benjamin's (1973a, p.217) identification of the 'universal equivalence of things' must also be differentiated from (aesthetic) *relativism*, which asymmetrically places priority in subjective mediation over recognition of the immanent properties and concrete relations of the object.

⁸² Tacita Dean's *FILM*, (11 minute loop), 12th commission for The Unilever Series, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, 11 October - 11 March, 2011

specificity of the material and affective quality of film seized upon and, foregrounded by its *handling*, undoubtedly attempts to create, as Dean (2011, p.29) notes ‘the wonder space that is experimental film.’ Yet, self-consciously constrained by its romantic, backward glance (that verges on historicism), with its insistence on reproducing early cinematic techniques, *FILM* would seem to be precluded from formal innovation or experimentation.

The visual style of *FILM* also seems to unproblematically, and deferentially conjure now canonical figures within art’s history, yet belies the aesthetic debates about representation, which such images once evoked. It unambiguously situates and claims film as High Art while eluding any sense of the avant-garde challenge or the modernist ideals, principles, and commitment in the struggles of abstraction as taken up by ‘absolute film’ of 1920s by filmmakers such as Richter, and that is evinced in, and out of which Breer’s *Form Phases IV* arises. cursory pictorial references in *FILM* are made, for example, to Mondrian’s absolute abstraction, as well as, Baldessari’s photo-conceptual paintings that wittily evoke geometric abstraction via the mass-produced ‘color dot sticker label’ to identify and interrogate traditional, how-to manuals and conventions of image-making, by masking aspects of appropriated photographs.

The avant-garde and modernist real-world (and utopian) speculations and disputes become symbolically obscured and formalized in *FILM*. The image-space evoked by *FILM* is, rather, romantically overshadowed by a picture-postcard-like shot of a mountain peak, which is collaged peering above fog-machine clouds or against shots of the modern industrial architecture of the Turbine Hall. The image becomes, Dean (2011, p.27) boldly claims, an *ideogram* (probably an implicit allusion to Eisenstein’s notion of vertical montage) with the central thematic of *FILM* explicated as; ‘*Mount Analogue*: analogue, which has now come to mean all that is not digital, and proposes a place, a mountain, a realm of the mind that can be reached by those who feel it is possible, in fact, necessary, to do so.’⁸³

From the safety of retrospection, and in sharp contrast to the inventive risks and visionary spirit of the avant-garde referenced, (such as, the profound difficulties associated with the lost manifesto for ‘Universal Language’, 1920 by Richter and Eggeling, or the purity that non-objective abstraction came to present over its ‘new realism’) these allusions are all glossed by this *postconceptual* approach to materialism. When considering the intersection of painting, photography, experimental film/video, animation and artists’ film, it is worth recalling the short article ‘Production-Reproduction’, 1922 on the ambitious relation between the avant-garde’s

⁸³ The mountain references the Paramount Pictures logo one of the first studios to exclusively distribute its films in the digital format, and the metaphysical adventure book *Mount Analogue*, 1952 by the *para-surrealist*, René Daumal of a spiritual voyage that begins on the ship *Impossible* and continues with the ascent of *Mount Analogue* in search of ‘the absolute’, through the consciousness of a transcendent real that lies not ahead but in the beyond.

transformative restructuring through technology and the development of the human sensory equipment, (evidently influential in relation to Benjamin). In it Moholy-Nagy (1985, p.289) contends that *reproduction* or the ‘reiteration of already existing relations, can be regarded for the most part as mere virtuosity’. Creative *production*, on the other hand, within artistic practice, aims to ‘bring about the most far-reaching *new* contacts between the familiar and the yet unknown optical, acoustical,’ and other phenomena or data, while also developing the ‘functional apparatuses’ (or perceptual sensorium of the viewer) to become capable of its reception. Likewise, Moholy-Nagy’s (1969, p.9) early assertions from 1924, on the creative impact that the optical technologies of film and photography have wrought upon the conceptions of art, remain apposite today. He writes, ‘the quality of a work need not be dependent absolutely on a “modern” or an “old” theory of composition. It is dependent on the degree of inventive intensity, which finds its technically appropriate form. All the same, it seems to me indispensable that we, the creators of our *own time*, should go to work with *up-to-date* means.’

In contrast to the historical avant-garde, it has become customary to make truth claims about the immediacy of art’s analogue materiality⁸⁴ while the digital media are typically relegated to immaterial replication, and deemed inauthentic, while its effects are at once dematerialized and become the apex of all things *ersatz* (a problematic discussed further in Chapter 5). In Dean’s (2011, p.16) criticism of digital cinema (and, by inference the digitized film industry), she opines that it has not yet substantively, ‘come into itself. It will, I am sure, when it becomes less preoccupied with imitating and destroying its antecedent, film, and more focused upon innovation and its own potential in hitherto uncharted territory and a hitherto uncharted cinema.’ To reflect this criticism back onto the way in which the conceptualization of *FILM* adopts certain ‘modernist’ tropes, it also becomes crucial to reflexively think upon the way that these, as well as experimental and avant-garde film are to a degree also being ‘imitated’ or ‘represented’ within a significantly changed contemporary framework. In this vein, Rees (2012, p.186) detects an intentional and processual difference when he argues that *FILM* is itself a ‘simulacrum of experimental cinema, or a tribute to avant-garde film rather than the genuine article’.

Following Osborne’s (2013, p.105) discussion of another of Dean’s work, one might note his criticism of the ‘repetition of motifs – and an element of “recreation” (distinct from re-enactment) - but no real sense of artistic legacy.’ This work of devotion (*FILM*) professedly demands a contemplative immersion, which conceivably, would be better suited to the traditional cinema situation than the gallery installation. Yet, in contrast to the tendency of a kind of literalist

⁸⁴ (which primarily signals the problematic of truth-to-materials, the choice of materials, the particularity and givenness of substances, and is less likely to signal the socio-historical determinations and processes of material systems in e.g. dialectical materialism)

materialism, Dean's *FILM* itself presents, however, *allusionary* profusions in which shots of the Turbine Hall, for instance, are montaged with other commonplace live-action shots of the surrounding environs (Tate's Thames side greenery, or its escalators) and collaged using complicated aperture gate masks with blocks of primary colors.

It is, rather, in the aggregate experience that *FILM* is constituted through the spectacular, high-end technical parameters of its installation (that is not *expanded cinema*).⁸⁵ It is the colossal scale of the screen, the unusual though entirely appropriate portrait projection and site-specific utilization of the Turbine Hall within *FILM* which are more ostensibly *handled* and offer compelling



ilm, than a transformation of the atic capacity to gaze back.⁸⁶

ean, *FILM*, 2011, (Unilever Series, Tate Modern, Oct. - March, 2012).

nner, despite the *contemplative* the cinematic image demanded d notwithstanding the romantic f the aura to the artistic process t, a diversion from actuality is by *FILM* through the s sight of the peripatetic viewers t by its use of the immaculately ojected cinemascope, but by the ended colossal 13-meter high vertical anamorphic orientation f the filmstrip itself, and is set

additionally to 'happen inside the notional cinematic space of the Turbine Hall itself: Turbine Hall as filmstrip, and conflate the imagined with the real in the wonder space that is experimental film.'

In *FILM*, the spectacular space occupied is mediated by the moving-image and both are held in a reciprocal tension by the viewer's *distracted* (spatial, peripatetic) reception. This could imply the

⁸⁵ One might note the absence of the term installation in relation to the discourse of *FILM* and its current fall from favor. Nor is the work framed in terms of *expanded cinema* in whose probing spirit one would have to ask: In what way does the work activate the live context of viewing, and harness shifts in the technological apparatus between art and life to become experientially thought provoking? Or, when does the high-impact exhibitionist cinema of ostensibly playful tricks or processual experiments take on deeper structural resonances?

⁸⁶ Image Source: (Tacita Dean, *FILM*, 2011, photo by Lucy Dawkins, 2011)

challenges of encompassing the gigantic scale of this space, and an apprehension about art sensationally scaled up for the big crowds, in what some object to, is the ‘final capitulation of installation art to the culture industry’ as noted by Bishop (2005, p.3). In many ways the central subject of *FILM* is not the imaginary radicalism of *Mount Analogue*, or even, of avant-garde and experimental film. Rather, the experience of the spectacle established by the vertical scale of the screen, is exceeded by the auratic and cavernous five-storey Turbine Hall, set in the great metropolis, whose ‘real’ is quintessentially ‘emptied’ and must to a degree be rendered a *non-place* by Art. Yet, even as artists consecutively attempt to transmogrify the Turbine Hall for the Unilever series, and it is transmuted, for instance, within Dean’s notion of the nominal filmstrip, it is overwhelmingly the hall itself, each time, that returns our gaze from beyond the works it contains, and whose own altered structure inadvertently contains the traces of the failed utopianism of modernism’s abstractions. Art, conversely, has also been potentially transformed, as Krauss initially warned, by the particular phenomenon of the installation.

In ‘Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition’, Krauss (1999a, p.56) offered a criticism, particularly against a tendency in installation artworks, that had become, as she saw it, ‘complicit with a globalization of the image in the service of capital,’ which ‘mimics just this leaching of the aesthetic out into the social field in general.’ The widely commodified ‘*materialization* of aesthetics’, as Baudrillard (1993, p.16) has appositely put it, necessitates in art as Krauss (2010a, p.xiv) argues, the leveraging of a work’s meaning, and a renewed specification of ‘the medium’ in practices that relate back to their material and technical supports, but are not bound by the now inoperable and outmoded notion of *medium-specificity* singularly associated with the traditional delineations of art into painting, sculpture etc.

Despite its changing circumstances, the Turbine Hall’s edifice remains evocative of modern industrial optimism, and a ‘cathedral of power’ that its original construction as an oil-fired Bankside Power Station still confers. Although the place has long been stripped of its electricity generators, the space remains a *monument* to industry, in the face of global industrial and ‘post-industrial’ shifts even as it withstands successive transformations in the Tate’s hugely popular series.⁸⁷ The attention drawn in *FILM* toward its sensuous and metaphorical use of the analogue is to a significant degree diverted from the use of ‘old’ techniques and technology, as the image becomes a showpiece and swansong to highlight the ‘real’ struggle of the format’s demise at the

⁸⁷ It should be noted that the series had prominent corporate sponsorship by Unilever, 2000-2012, and Tate more broadly has sponsorship by BP that has elicited public denunciation in 2010 by prominent figures from the art’s community calling for divestment, with ongoing forms of protest. See: Guardian letter: *Curators, Crude Oil and an Outdated Cultural Mix*. (Haacke et al., 2010)

untimely mercy of market prejudices. The catalogue and film itself become, as Dean (2011, p.33) proclaims, 'a call to arms' (for freedom of choice within the market).⁸⁸

If the condition of the installation and its relation to the exhibition series is considered then one must begin to reflect not only upon the work's terms and frames of engagement, (e.g. *FILM*'s image content) but also on the differing character of the collective participation or distraction that installations encourage, along with the attitude and engagement that they have towards the organizational context and surrounding environment. Finally, one must consider the way artworks and the exhibition engages in a 'dialectics of duration'. In this scenario, which Osborne (2004, p.69) has observed elsewhere, viewers actively experience the processes of temporalization in the interplay and rhythm of continuity and interruption that are produced; where artworks stimulate the potentially illuminating moments that distraction affords, along with bringing to the fore the underlying 'temporal structure of experience which it must engage if it is to be *contemporary* and effective'. This recognition is in keeping with the avant-garde's deployment of art's technological apparatus in ways that challenge but also reveal the varied scope and extent to which, for instance, the impact of sensory overload and deficiency in a modern networked metropolis is coped with. The shared space and commonly distracted perception of installations cannot simply be seen as an impediment to the reception of an individual artwork but is often an integral part of the way such works activate spectatorship and are to be experienced *in situ*, live.

Commending *FILM* in the article, 'Frame by Frame', Krauss (2012) redeploys an earlier argument from 'Reinventing the Medium' (1999b), which draws upon Benjamin's materialist historiography and its pointed critique of the belief in progress, deeming that precisely as the outdated is superseded, the complex interval from its inception can yet be redeemed in its descent into obsolescence, and the lost potential, or Utopian dimension, that was nascent at its dawn can be made once again apparent. This argument retains traces of Benjamin's (1978d, p.181) political imperative that the historical avant-garde seize the 'revolutionary energies that appear in the outmoded', or more explicitly the derided, lowly and overlooked commonplaces by bringing together in montaged constellations 'the immense forces of "atmosphere" concealed in things to the point of explosion'.

Undoubtedly a critique of the assumed neutrality of technological evolution is imperative, as the artist Rhodes (2011, p.113) has written in a contribution to the catalogue for *FILM*. The passage furthermore touches on the persistent anxiety that 'technical diversity is monopolized,' as well as,

⁸⁸ Dean pleads for *the choice* of analogue and digital film formats, noting a cultural division between art and the 'film' industry, while the online petition was directed specifically against the closure of one of the UK's remaining 16mm printing services in March 2011, when Soho Film Labs was taken over by US firm Deluxe, with its alleged digital bias.

the darker exploitation and origins of new-media as part of the technologies of war, or in other words, the military-consumer complex, which remains largely obscured. On the more general condition of the moving-image, however, and located with the terse exactitude of the double-bind, Rhodes objects that, ‘the economies of film production tend to be expensive and therefore exclusive, the economies of digital production hypocritical.’⁸⁹ In this light it is evident that within the recent and wide-ranging turn to ‘materialist aesthetics,’ the auratization of film remains a potentially problematic assertion for artworks, such as, *FILM* because it serves the hierarchies and conservatism of the art-world that would not only relegate much digital image production to the periphery, but has been considerably suspicious of, for instance, its capacity to circulate images freely (Groys, 2008).

When reflecting more expansively on the exhibition, it seems increasingly questionable that the achievements of *FILM* would significantly reside in the perception of the film’s material processing writ large, as Dean has claimed. Krauss (2012, p.419) in the article, ‘Frame by Frame’ would seem to concur when she describes *FILM* as emblematic of the way that ‘contemporary artists truculently hold out against the meretriciousness and vulgarity of what I have called the ‘post-medium condition’. This is part of a diagnosis of the general aesthetic difficulties that post-modern art presents, with its mixed-media, technological hybridity and apparent plurality, for artist-theorists endeavoring to ‘formulate the basis of formal coherence’ within specific artforms. (Krauss, 2010b, p.1) Breer’s nuanced treatment of this problematic will be taken up in the following section in terms of cinematic objects, and with regards to film in Chapters 4-6.

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One might note that negative connotations associated with the *post-medium condition*, and wariness of the prefix ‘post-’ is in *practice* overstated, and often literalized in relation to the digital, obscuring the more dialectically constructive potential of putting into play the concept of obsolescence associated, more interestingly, with the crisis of traditional mediums in the moments of their modern self-recognition and constructive, conceptual transformations. While the change to the fortunes of the moving-image, with its current resounding acceptance into the gallery, is in part a consequence of the centrality of the status of the photographic within conceptual art, and the readymade incorporation of diverse objects and modes, it is also underpinned, as Manovich (2002b) describes in *The Language of New Media*, by the situation of the rapid proliferation of the personal desktop computer after the mid 1990’s. The subsequent technical differentiation and continued innovation of its tools, forms, platforms, networks etc.,

⁸⁹ Digital hypocriticality suggests the utopic promises made of social media more generally, which is reflected in some of the discourse of interactive artwork, along with overreaching claims of the technologies capacity in terms of ‘digital democratization’.

according to the initial enthusiasm of Manovich (2002b, p.6) would become ‘the emergence of a new medium – the meta-medium of the digital computer.’

Furthermore, from the standpoint of the so-called digital revolution, Manovich (2002b, p.306) maintains that ‘avant-garde aesthetic strategies came to be embedded in the commands and interface metaphors of computer software. In short the avant-garde became materialized in a computer.’ In this scenario, the avant-garde is consumed not by popular culture, or capitalist commodification, as is typically conceded, but by its intricate embroilment with the technology of its expression. Manovich’s (2002a, pp.3, 11) assumption in the section ‘Avant-garde as Software’ is that the avant-garde’s modernist concern was based in the ‘technology of seeing’ to innovate new pictorial forms in reference to the then recently invented media of film and photography. Manovich forecloses the potential of the endeavours of the historical avant-garde in his interpretation that their techniques are attempts to humanize these apparently objective representational forms, rather than consider their machinic engagement as a contribution to the ongoing problem of the relation of technology to the question of the self, subject, and more broadly the collective, which is explored in Breer’s film *Bang!* (Chapter 6).

With respect to the avant-garde, it might be noted, however, that when classified as a repertoire of visual techniques, it becomes fixed and thus aesthetically exhausted. It is severed from any possibility of performing the open-ended event of its enquiry into the nexus of temporality, experience and its technological mediation, and thus becomes reified as stylistic shorthand, and pre-empted as an end in itself. Manovich continues that in the computer’s capacity to synthesize the codes of the avant-garde, it becomes the site of assimilated manipulation, emerging as the new post-modern avant-garde, which is steeped explicitly in the logic of the database – as a ‘technology of memory’, (to which one might add, a Benjaminian caveat concerning experience, that it has become in this framework, part of a technology of forgetting that memory is an embodied process entangled with collective reminiscence).

Circumventing both the *post-medium condition*, and the *meta-medium of the digital*, Groys (2008, pp.84, 88) argues in ‘Art in the Age of Digitization’ the implications of how digital data is visualized across its many platforms, networks, screens and increasingly in terms of the rapid turnover of ‘generations of technology’ must also be theorized more broadly in terms of the in/visibility of technology as part of the image, along with the often ambiguous duration of viewing, and the self-determined, flexibility of the viewer’s peripatetic movement through the exhibition space, which fundamentally raise the problematic and ‘added aesthetic value of bringing the digitized moving-image into the exhibition space’. These differing situations, along with shifts in the material mediation of form have effects as the *signifiers* of the image-content, as with the

importance of the loop, seriality etc. And this also heralds changes to the conception of spectatorship itself with effects upon the content's signified and signification of the 'collective field of imagination' (Barthes, 1964, p.25) more generally. The recent devotion of artists to celluloid and other analogue means, as well as the attraction of early modern cinema, undoubtedly makes the shifts in technology a distinction that is part of the work's image. However, the seemingly accessible, throwaway, inventive and spontaneous energies associated with the proliferation of electronic and digitally animated screens, (not to mention the state-of-the-art synchronized multi-screen works etc.) have also widely raised the visibility of such questions, which has entailed a radical rethink of the dominance of the cinema situation, and which taken together with the revaluation of pre-cinema, has inaugurated an astonishing transformation of the animated form's fortunes.

One might briefly turn to the exemplary exhibition, *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, 2002 as an example of this interconnection between the experimental and technological expansion of the moving-image in digital practices underpinned by an engagement with the discourses of pre-cinema and situationist cinema that are brought together with carnivalesque revelry. It partakes in both renewed interest of narrative poetics allied with developments in imaging technologies, as well as, the revitalized exploration of the *cinema of attractions*.⁹⁰ (Gunning, 1986) The diverse modalities of the expanding digital-arts are constellated with precursory modes of pre-cinema, such as early film presented at fairground or vaudevillian exhibitions, and as part of displays of novel machinery (prior to its establishment within theatre-houses by the early 1900's). These hybrid modalities are also concerned with avant-garde film (and the modernist interest in developing the unique potentiality of the medium beyond its usurpation under 'the tyranny' - as Kubelka still describes it - of traditional literary and theatrical modes).⁹¹ All of this becomes part of an intended disruption of the ritualization within the aesthetic and socio-spatial conditions of conventional cinematic experience.

In contrast to the framework presented by *FILM*, *Future Cinema* claims that the contemporary conjuncture, which celebrates expanded film, and the installed works of artists' film is facilitated, and not diminished by the emergent modalities in the digital arts. Such approaches attempt to subvert, and to *détourner* the hegemonic and homogeneous conceptions of cinema, and the spectacularized uses of the moving-image technology within commercialized stadium displays etc. Such modalities include, for example, digitally expanded installations that are navigable,

⁹⁰ Gunning (1986, p.66) differentiates cinema's capacity to show or foreground the image itself as something to be seen, in a direct-address to the viewer, i.e. as 'exhibitionist confrontation' compared with that of 'diegetic absorption' within narration, 'illusory imitativeness' and the capacity to tell. Much recent artist-film holds these aspects in tension.

⁹¹ Peter Kubelka, experimental filmmaker giving a pedagogic performance and showing his flicker or metric films during *Graphology*, at The Drawing Room Gallery, London, 16.6.2012.

interactive, networked, multi-user, and/or immersive. Likewise, the proliferation and variety of screens including online, or small scale mobile formats, as well as, the proliferation and variety in projection and projection surfaces e.g. domes, hazy atmospheres etc. has also expanded the cinematic imaginary. Certainly one must be wary of *textualization* that would bracket out the complex reality of the referent in a radical severance from the world of things and the processes of history (as with art and media's endless recursivity). But nor should attention to the mediation of form be overstatedly reduced to 'the fetishization of technology', an anxiety within some of the current pedagogy of animation, taken up, for instance, by Ward (2006, p.236) appropriately critiquing the tendency in animation 'courses that are predominantly merely reflexive' of production processes, and not of 'broader theoretical and contextual dimensions'.

The book of *Future Cinema* (Weibel & Shaw, 2003) commences with Debord's epigrammatic provocation to interrogate the dominant institutional form of film, and the structures of representation in the one page document *Prolegomena to All Future Cinema* (1952). The *Prolegomena* is a Situationist injunction, calling for the Lettrist dislocation of material and textual elements of the (black box) 'cinema situation' including the usual mode of spectatorship: 'The arts of the future will contain the shattering of situations, or nothing'. Or, as it is further expressed in Debord's (2003, p.2) first film, *Hurlements en Faveur De Sade*, 1952, 'A science of situations needs to be created, which will incorporate elements from psychology, statistics, urbanism, and ethics. These elements must be focused on a totally new goal: *the conscious creation of situations*.' The provocative, interventionist mode of engagement which is raised by Debord's *Prolegomena*, included by *Future Cinema* is part of the *détournement* which aims to disrupt the *spectacle*⁹² and the *necessarily* illusionary representations it produces of capitalism's structural relations, whose reach is extended further by the intensification of mass-media.⁹³ This entails appropriating the language and images of the *spectacle* in a way that works against and exposes its structural alienations.

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Breer: an Experimental Repudiation without Proclamation

⁹² Debord (1983, p. Theses #1) theorized the *spectacle* as the ideological mediation of social relations primarily through the unilateral communication and circulation of images, whose ascendancy is achieved with the totalization of sign exchange and commodification of lived life.

⁹³ The predominantly unilateral communication of the *spectacle* has, however, become extended through forms of surveillance, yet at the same time, complicated within multifarious sites of inconsistency and contradiction, as well as by sites of globally networked communities and finally in a massively modified technological context: the ubiquity of digital media, image and movie-making software on personal computers (which is itself a powerful tool for the practical appreciation of representational issues) and expanding possibilities of self-publishing on the Internet. Other so-called cultural products, such as televised promotional shows dedicated to appraising cinematic illusions or *infotainment* that expose special-effects magic and DVD extras, all voraciously feed back into the capitalist economy without any aspiration to criticality.

Interestingly it might be noted that although there is scant reference to the Lettrists in Breer's (Beauvais, 2006, p.160) interviews, he does mention that he knew of them during his corresponding time in Paris, but considered himself to be an 'anti-intellectual snob' at the time. While his opinion subsequently changed, such work he felt was a 'rehash of Dada'. Conversely it was associated with Duchamp's aesthetic which he felt was 'trop précieux enfin n'est-ce pas'. 'I wanted more plastic richness', Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.3) argues, discussing the series of images produced in flipbooks that were then incorporated into free-standing mutoscopes, and continues that he was 'mainly interested in the possibility of demonstrating the denoting of plastic ideas with a book.' One might suggest from this that Breer's work develops out of both the entanglement of materials and resistances in the process itself, in ways that are not rooted in literary tendencies or predetermined contrivances.

As such, Breer's work often affords a direct, candid openness across the spaces traversed with moments of surprise that are part of its deep appeal and more generally comprises both the potential failure, and equally 'the wonder space of experimental film' as Dean (2011, p.29) rightly puts it. While Breer does not typically make explicit political claims for his filmic aesthetics he is nevertheless concerned with many of the 'Lettrist innovations', which includes scratching celluloid, the discrepancy of sound and image, and to a considerable degree the creation of cinematic situations through his own processual, experimental, aesthetic logic. While I argue, on the one hand that there is a conceptual aspect which arises out of Breer's investigations of the filmic image, on the other hand it should be noted that he did not pursue the primacy of an analytic approach, which was central to the Lettrist's, along with the force of language in the gesture of appropriation of sound and image in the practices of *détournement* or the *dérive*.

*Breer's Cinematic Objects & Structuring the possibilities of Movement:
Recapturing the Animated Moment of Pre-cinema & its Current Digital Ubiquity*

The recent interest in this early period of cinema history undoubtedly gives Breer's work a renewed prominence and an increasing recognizability of the various contexts which his endeavours touch. The subtle account and critique in his work encompasses narrativity, and live-action's cultural domination since 1950s, lasting well into the 1990s. The original reception of Breer's works would have been in this context obscured by the scale of the power structure and hierarchy of the Hollywood industry, which limited the diversity in cinema's cultural production and reception, with effects not only on European cinema, but also for independent producers, and 'artist-filmmakers' needing to gain access to a distribution and exhibition system. The

hundred-or-so-year interval of the sequestration of film in the 'black box' of the movie-theatre has now become itself a historical periodization, a particular instance of the moving-image. This discernable change, as suggested, is brought about in part by technological advances at a moment when the diverse participatory capacity of the animated moving-image is again brought to the fore - not only by its relatively recent widespread acceptance into the 'white cube', but also with the ongoing digital 'revolution' where the animated image gains a scope, whose prevalence is instanced far beyond the gallery, in spheres both off- and online.

Interestingly even at the disciplinary level of film, one might note a reversal of animation's marginalization evident in the recent reappraisals of the customary categorial hierarchy maintained by Cognitive film theory, prevailing since the 1990s, in which animation studies was regarded as a sub-category of film-theory and relegated to the status of an eccentric relation.⁹⁴ These changes can be tracked, for instance, in the changing editions of the key Cognitive Film-Theory textbooks, such as, *Film Art* by Bordwell and Thompson, which initially paid scant attention to animated films. However, despite the way the genealogy of these fields has been dramatically unsettled by the interjection of digital imaging technologies, animation-studies and film-theory divisions and debates, for instance, have tracked a course of surprising continuity with disciplinary boundaries of remarkable resiliency.

With the recent shift in circumstances, the question that has continually haunted such debates is whether animation constitutes an academic discipline, in terms of a distinct field of knowledge, as it oscillates between its status as a film genre i.e. independent animation, commercial cartoons, etc., live-action's other, on the one hand, or whether it is first and foremost a *technique* that lies at the heart of live-action film with its capacity for single-frame manipulation special-effects, moving typographic design, title sequences etc. The technique of animation, however, is no longer restricted to the single-screen cinematic format, and has proliferated in multiple mobile formats, online and in interactive media, such as video games. It has also become fundamental to the visualization techniques of digital design. For instance, 3D CGI (computer generated imaging) is utilized for a range of enterprises beyond entertainment including medical imaging and military-industrial applications, such as, vehicle design, simulation war-games and therapy, robotics, sports science etc. And this is not to mention the nascent changes indicated by the prospective revolution in the organic electronics of biochemical engineering, and bespoke 3D printing for additive manufacturing.

With recent shifts in debates, theorists such as Crafton (2011, p.94) continue to trouble disciplinary boundaries and the self-perceived status of animation, its relation to film-theory,

⁹⁴ See also: 'Animation Studies, Displinary, Discursivity' (Ward, 2003)

along with the implications of digital technology as initially touched on by Manovich (2002b). Against the priorities that would typically locate animation as a sub-genre within film, Cholodenko (2009, p.3) maintains the rejoinder that ‘not only is animation a form of cinema, cinema – all cinema – is a form of animation’. Cholodenko attempts to forge transversal passageways of such thought through disciplinary boundaries by taking into account not only the way that other theoretical and practical disciplines cast light, for instance, upon animation but also of how animation and the animated image, in a necessarily expanded sense, might illuminate other disciplines. In a consideration of theorists of the photograph, Cholodenko (2005, p.5) has likewise argued, that along with all cinema, ‘all photography, photography as such – is a form of animation’.

This sense of the serialized image no doubt has correspondence to Breer’s work and approach. Despite wanting, as Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.7) states to have ‘serious art attention’ he was presented with a situation in which the gallery system of the times ‘didn’t recognize film as a serious medium.’ Given that Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.10) repeatedly maintains that he ‘backed into all these areas’ it was this rebellious sensibility, and apparently marginalized vantage point that allowed him to open this space up in practice-based experimental, and conceptual ways. Concerning the ‘plastic possibility of movement’, Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.5) continues, referencing his own time, that it hadn’t been ‘explored very much, not seriously, then presented as an idea. [...] I was making films all this time, but I was looking for objects that could be looked at in daylight and not be so theatrical’.

Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.5) regards the paradox of the filmic still, and considers the materiality of film in relation to its perceptual effects, but does this by interrogating its status as an object, and its status in relation to divergent environments, which touches on the complexity of its reception, stating that, ‘the hand-cranked mutoscope allowed for seeing and pacing the transition from single, static images into their combined form as “cinema” and back again.’ (Figure 39) This is done nevertheless in a way that embodies, Breer continues, an interest in the ‘excitement of the original “movie” experience.’ Previously Breer (Levine, 1973, p.4) has also contended that,

The idea to make mutoscopes was to bring movies again into the gallery situation, where I could have a concrete object, which gave this mysterious result of motion... I wanted this to be in the open, so that you’d really experience this pure effect of – persistence of vision. It was also the idea to get people interested that would go to art galleries to look at this phenomenon instead of - you know, the general movie audience just accepts without questioning. All my ideas had to do with material I was using and I wanted to examine it

more closely, and bring it into the open, to expose it, and so forth. So that mutoscopes came along as an after-thought, a way of presenting flipbooks, if you like.

Breer discusses his examination of the filmic medium in terms of an expanded critical space, and criticizes the enchanted imaginary and the allure of its mystification that is often celebrated under the rubric of movie magic. This reflexive attitude, one could speculate, stems from an avant-garde impetus but might also be rooted in Breer's (Hoberman, 1980, p.48) background in engineering through his father (Introduction), and his early studies of it at Stanford before transferring to the art department. However, Breer holds on to the primary captivation of the engineer, in terms of the affective beauty of mechanics and its effective potentiality in the world, which is translated into a concern for the filmic-object in relation to its environment. 'I got disorientated by the theatrical situation of film', Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.40) states, 'by the fact that you have to turn out the lights and there is a fixed audience, and when you turn out the lights you turn on the projection light and you project the piece of magic on the wall. I felt that this very dramatic, theatrical situation, in some ways, just by the environment of the movie house, robbed some of the mystery of film from itself. My early sculpture was an attempt to make films concrete that could be seen in daylight.'

Breer's exploration of the cinema situation is reminiscent of the materialism of Benjaminian (1999b, p.216) perspective that is elaborated through a concern for modern art's de-forming anthropology, or what he calls the liquidation of the everyday in the flash of *profane illumination*, in which he criticizes mystification and 'a romantic turn of mind' that becomes essentially enthralled, be it in contemplation or abandoned intoxication. However, Benjamin does not lose sight of the centrality of the intoxicated moment to forms of comprehension, freedom, and innovation, as well as to revolutionary action, stating that 'we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world by virtue of a dialectical optic.' This is done by Benjamin (2008b, p.285) with a view to historicize the questions of experience and perception and to critique the esoteric mysticism associated with the aura and aesthetics by exploring the way such work and its technological mediation 'initiates the emancipation of object from aura'.

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The interval since the exhibition *Future Cinema, The Cinematic Imaginary After Film*, 2002 has seen the revival and popular 'archaeology' of the genesis of the moving-image, commemorating, for instance, the chronophotography (1870-1900) of Marey and Muybridge, the camera obscura, Victorian attractions, and the amusements of the parlour room, e.g. the flip-book (kineograph), thaumatrope, zoetrope and praxinoscope etc. aspects of which are incorporated by Breer in his

animated works (Chapter 6). While for the discipline of animation the ostensibly technical aspect of chronophotography with its systematic breakdown of movement, as seen in Figure 41, is often uncritically celebrated, it is worth briefly recollecting how the extensive photographic archives of the period tended to be pressed into the instrumentalization of photographic observation and perception.⁹⁵



Doane (2002, p.60), however, argues in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* that these visualizations and presentations were invariably also haunted by a sphere of illegibility, and the sense of vitality of the indeterminate aspects of the photographic image is equally investigated by modernism. The long exposures of the Futurist *photodynamic* image (Figure 42), for instance, differentiates itself from the directives of photographic positivism and the analytic research into movement,



and hence can be contrasted to Marey and e.g. the Gilbreth micro-motion films (Figure 76).⁹⁶

Figure 42. Bragaglia, *The Typist*, 1911. (Gelatin silver print, 4.6x6.5in).

Photodynamism presents a rejection of the fixity of the photographic moment and the

⁹⁵ Image Source: (Marey & Demeny, 1914)

⁹⁶ Image Source: (Bragaglia, 1911)

logic of its verisimilitude by attempting to capture the quintessence of speed, density, variation and *simultaneity*.⁹⁷

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It against such a backdrop that Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.18) utilization of pre-cinematic devices, and the simultaneity of the filmic 'space-image' (Chapter 5) becomes recognizable. Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.5) references the time-lapse of Futurism, acknowledging the import of their exploitation 'of this unexplored plastic possibility of movement'. Breer's own disavowal of animated realism or vulgar naturalism suggests he was conversant with the ideological questions which underpin the technical parameters of time captured within the still, along with the paradoxically illusionary aspect of speed and movement. Breer's decision to turn to pre-cinematic devices as well as the construction of kinetic objects, and presenting, for instance, the hands-on, hand-cranked mutoscope (Figure 39) implicitly expresses a refusal to glorify the pace and progress of mechanization or to romanticize and mystify more broadly the technologization of power. This is likewise made apparent in the emphasis of his single-frame aesthetic within film, and in his imperceptibly moving motorized *Float* sculptures. On the exaltation of speed and the technological present, Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.5) continues, 'the Futurists had already exploited that [possibility of movement] and the times were different.'

With regards to contemporary museum display, the way exhibitions prioritize the work's original objecthood over the tactility of experience, can tend to feel specious when art using early manual devices is enclosed in a cabinet of curiosities, or preciously contained within pools of soft sepia light.⁹⁸ Against the museumification of such optical toys, and circumventing the more reverentially contemplative stance within both the black-box and white-cube, came the practical and spirited jolt of Breer's (Macdonald, 1992, p.30) own utilization of the mutoscope, which commenced with the 1959 exhibition 'Motion in Vision / Vision in Motion', Antwerp⁹⁹, in which he designed and constructed cinematic objects of various forms, including the rotary file cards which the participant could flip through at various speeds and stop to study individual frames (Figure 39).

In Uroskie's (2014, pp.94, 103) 'Precision Optics and Philosophical Toys' it is argued that Breer's kineograph (flipbook) *Image by Images*, 1955 was not bound in this period by the conventions of

⁹⁷ An important influence for the Dadaists, in *En Avant Dada*, Huelsenbeck (1951c, pp.25, 35) claims Marinetti, 'used a chorus of typewriters, kettledrums, rattles, and pot-covers to suggest the "awakening of capital"', continuing, however, that 'simultaneity is against what has become, and for what is becoming'.

⁹⁸ (e.g. consider the *Joseph Cornell: Wunderlust* exhibit, 2015, Royal Academy.)

⁹⁹ (Sillars & Pardey, 2011, p.78)

the art gallery and principally functioned beyond its forms of recognition. The low-art or what Uroskie calls, 'primitive technology' of an array of animation techniques, in this case the flip-book, is reframed more specifically as an *artist-book* to rectify the way in which it has largely been disregarded in accounts of the *Le Mouvement*, 1955 exhibition (Chapter 2). Uroskie (2014, p.108) argues that Breer's works, which utilize and transform these *readymade* objects, such as the flip-book and mutoscope, evoke a 'critical optic' that conjures the 'nearly obliterated history of cinema's emergence, an inchoate period of possibility which a multiplicity of exhibitionary and spectatorial models still competed for attention.'

Yet, beyond the apparent diversity of the pre- and early cinematic period and in contrast to the subsequent hegemony of the studio cinema and TV systems between the 1950s-1990s, debates about the ideology of form were far from inchoate. Such discourses had considerable impact upon the development of practices, as suggested by the way that the *photodynamism* of Futurism is at once captivated by and contests Marey's earlier attitude within chronophotography, and which has resonance with other post-cubist approaches including Duchamp's conceptualization, and critiques of the representation of movement. If the image of Breer's mutoscopes, flipbooks and by extension the hand-made, experimental animation-films are taken to be less a singular engagement in medium differential-specificity, and more notably as attaining to the status of a *readymade* then one might ask what sense of the *readymade* is being appealed to. Osborne (2002, p.28) contends that the *readymade* is a transitional object that allegorizes the indifference of art to the institution and rank of 'good' taste, and opens the way up to both Pop art, the critique of commodity aesthetics, and minimalism, as well as to the 'pure' conceptualism of language-based anti-aesthetics. If the critical optic of Breer's forms considered as *readymade* is determined primarily to be the repudiation of the discourses and structures of dominant cinema, what tends to be obscured is the particularity of Breer's critique of the cinematic imaginary through his subversion and destabilization of the representation of movement which is bound to the pleasure of the aesthetic image.

Uroskie's framework, while important, to an extent limits the critical optic of Breer's approach (and the priority of its single-frame aesthetics), by continuing to skirt the problematic of the coexistent but low-value held of animation more broadly. This condition endures yet is challenged by Breer's decision to continue to work extensively in animation film, whose conventions with regard to the expectations of movement and narrativity are in turn flouted by his works. Breer's film-process is particularly resonant today for the informed way he aesthetically interrogates form, materials, and his situation (from the tendencies within the artworld to a critique of the everyday) along the lines he frequently describes as *thresholds* (Chapter 1). In a letter Breer (1973a, p.70) lists the principal ways in which he deals with thresholds such as

the domain between the still and moving-image, in conventions between literary tendencies and abstraction in various disciplines, such as, the painterly, sculptural and cinematic, and finally between the imperceptible and conscious perception of the machinery of motion. To cite Breer's (1973a, p.70) passage again, he writes that 'it has to do with revealing the artifices instead of concealing them. The fact of that rabbit sitting inside the magician's hat is the real mystery, not how it's dissimulated. The hat should be transparent and show the rabbit. So it's again the threshold area that defines the form.'

It is in this vein that one might also consider the pedagogic turn to such pre-cinematic objects in a penetrating relation to kineticism and the sphere of gallery exhibition. Breer's 'critical optic' it could be argued is directed, not only at the hegemony of a particular cinematic imaginary, but also at the hierarchies of value maintained by the artworld, and at this level could be taken to present a provocation in the tradition of the *readymade*. Uroskie (2014, p.104) aims to give a new prominence to Breer's work, and redresses his occlusion, by locating his appropriation of pre-cinematic devices in the tradition of neo-dadaist gesture whose scope is suggestive of 'escaping the white-cube'. Yet, in contrast to such a perspective, I would argue that it is important to situate Breer's development in relation to abstraction, (as in *Form Phases IV*, and the collage of *Recreation* respectively, and to avant-garde figures, such as Richter and Schwitters). Notwithstanding their ties to Dadaism, such artists were doggedly unconvinced by the more egotistic and hypocritical aspects of the anti-art stance, which is likewise expressed by the (post)aesthetic attention to the image of their work and its apprehension that the material-content of form is key to its communicable expression.

Breer repeatedly states that his struggle in utilizing the medium of animated film was not only to be duly shown within the white-cube, but also that his film-works should be recognized as 'seriously' contributing to its shifting debates. Uroskie goes on to argue that Breer's utilization of the flipbook and later mutoscopes are part of the transformation of art's conventions from within, and through its embrace of outmoded popular artifacts, as well as, its exploration of the spatio-temporal complexities of movement situates Breer's approach directly in Duchamp's lineage, and particularly in connection to the *Rotoreliefs*.

More broadly, the lineage sought in Duchamp for optical art and kineticism was set up by the *Le Mouvement*, 1955, exhibition through its inclusion of Duchamp's early, *Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*, 1925. Yet, one might note that many artists in the *Le Mouvement* exhibit dealt with aspects of Duchamp's critiques, such as, the 'subjective authority of the artist' (Foster et al., 2004, p.419) with reliefs that admitted chance and a constrained form of participation (within the limits of a procedure or game) with the work's modification by the viewer (Agam, Bury). To this it should

be added Breer's *Images by Images*, 1955 kineograph, which could be thumbed through at various speeds and stopped at particular images. Aspects of this lineage could be suggested to a degree for the nascent form of Kineticism that the *Le Mouvement* exhibition endeavored to introduce with its focus, to reiterate, on natural (Calder) and mechanical motion (Tinguely) along with the illusion of motion in early Op-Art (Vasarely). The illusion and critique of motion explored by Breer (Wetzel, 2010, p.149) in the pre-cinematic device (flip-book *Image by Images*) and in film (*Un Miracle* and *Form Phases IV*) associated with *Le Mouvement* exhibition, however, went as mentioned, largely unrecognized in this context and were effectively relegated to separate status. To a great extent it is Breer's subsequent film, *Recreation*, 1956, (a recreation of the destroyed film-loop *Image by Images I*, 1954) where this exploration of the mechanics of film is explicitly explored (Chapter 4).

Returning briefly to Duchamp's work it should be noted that the mode of investigation of the *Rotary Demisphere* is typically related to the *Rotoreliefs* and the later (linear) documentation in the film *Anémic Cinéma*, 1926 of the disc loops. The rotating spiral graphics of the *Rotary Demisphere* are layered between glass on a cone axis creating the illusion of an oscillating three dimensional sphere which is achieved without, as Huhtamo (2003, p.61) notes, resorting to stereoscopy. He makes the interesting argument that the combination of spirals and text in the form of the *Rotoreliefs*, and the *Rotary Demisphere*¹⁰⁰ is rooted in the lineage of investigation which relates to the composite image created by the earlier 19C thaumatrope, (typically a rotating round card with two separate images on either side, such a bird and cage, whose identities are combined when spun rapidly enough by a mechanism, stick, or string.)

Uroskie (2014, p.110) however, emphasizes that Duchamp's repossession of a 'nineteenth-century philosophical toy in the form of precision optics', presented the critical perspective that was to 'serve several generations of younger artists as a model for analyzing the cultural force of cinema at a critical remove from the theater which had become naturalized.' It is worth reiterating Joselit's (1998, p.163) argument relating to Duchamp's *Rotary Demisphere*, and his post-cubist fascination with movement and kinetics that 'sought not to simulate motion as the futurists had but rather to diagram it,' allied as it is to the paradoxical mechanics and stratagems of various 'precision optics'. It might be noted that, while the then contemporaneous technology of the turntable disc is looped and temporal, it is not consecutive in the paradigmatic form that single-frame aesthetic of animation and chronophotography typically had to deal with. As a later form of *readymade* it foregrounds, Joselit (1998, p.173) goes on to argue, not the question of the status of the object in the 'encounter between a commodity and its inscription', but of how the object, that was never purely conceptual, more broadly unsettles the situation of its environment,

¹⁰⁰ (a glass cone-disc surrounded by a pun etched in chrome that rotates without any persistence-of-vision effects)

from the habits of the artist studio to the exhibition space itself.

Uroskie's attention to Breer's works that have a particular fitness within the schema of operating 'between the black box and the white cube' as the title of the book suggests, is important and insightful, yet, would seem to risk disremembering the profound importance of the aesthetic image to Breer's films regardless of which context it came to be seen in. And as will be discussed in Chapter 6 on the film *Bang!*, 1986, Breer makes his own reference to many pre-cinematic devices within the film itself, whose image-content openly indexes this period of intense interest in the kinetics and optics and the illusion of motion, but which is also, unusually, anchored thematically in autobiographical terms.

More generally, however, the dissipations of Breer's (post)aesthetic struggle with painting and (kinetic) sculpture, the moving and still image, his anarchic, humourous and dynamic experimentation that is sustained, not only in the medium and mechanics of animation-film, but also in the way that the spatio-temporal oppositions of its form bleed into the opening of the image-space and help create the fluidity of its graphic content. The apparatus of film, (its mechanics and reception) become, however briefly, fragmented with Breer's singular processes. The interruptions of everyday life are absorbed and refracted in Breer's works, which explicitly utilize technology in such a way that it liquefies received canonic conventions of the gallery and cinema. To push Uroskie's argument, one might claim that post-war art-works, such as the 'single-frame' film foregrounding the illusions of movement in *Recreation*, 1956 present an optic not only onto the situation of dominant film culture, but perhaps more crucially by its uncanny parallax brings into view the setting and conventions not only of the cultural but, with its image-content, a structurally melancholic concern with the everyday itself.

To reiterate the importance for Breer of the image, and working in animation film, Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.12) affirms his shifting priorities,

shortly after that we made the mutoscopes and used plastic cards and really worked into that and got a semi-permanent art form out of it. But I became bored with that. It seemed subsidiary to film, really. [...] But then to put a motor on a mutoscope you might as well have a film, it seems. I couldn't reconcile the two things and I finally went over to motors because I felt like the participation of somebody turning the crank... They get involved in a kineasthetic thing which isn't necessarily related to what they are seeing. I think that set up suggestions that I wasn't interested in resolving. I really wanted my attention to be fully on what they visually [observed]. [...] It answers all the requirements of something that's formally composed, self-contained, and so forth. But other than that a lot of those sculptures were transitional things.

CHAPTER 4

In Pursuit of Recreation, 1956

To reiterate, Breer's trajectory commences as part of the postwar revival of interest in modern aesthetic ideas, as well as, the legacy of abstraction, and this more exceptionally includes for Breer's practice the early 'absolute' films of the 1920s. As previously noted, Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.159) suggests, 'the tradition of avant-garde cinema was *un peu desséchée* at that time, no one had been working in it much since the 1930s.' The 1950s revival in abstract art signaled changes, however, in which the 'purity' of form and the traditional delimitations of mediums had become wholly complicated. New implications for art were presented by photographic technologies and the intensification of mass-media, art's increasingly conceptual turn influenced by Dadaist's, such as Duchamp, and also aesthetic notions emerging around the 'new medium' of *assemblage* of which Schwitters was a crucial proponent as Seitz (1961, p.87) has argued.

When asked to reflect upon Dada influences and, for instance, its machinic vocabulary, Breer positions his work with an equivocality about the roots of 1920s conceptualism with its apparent dilettantism and highlights Schwitters' aesthetic sensibility. In distinction to the renewed prominence of conceptualism for post-war neo-avant-garde artists of the 1950s, Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.160) notes that it was a period of strong debate and he was 'questioning the validity of Duchamp at the time' who seemed 'a bit "trop précieux enfin n'est-ce pas." By contrast, Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.3) speaks of the desire for 'more plastic richness', and a 'heartfelt sympathy for Schwitters' (which will be returned to). Orchard (2000, p.280) likewise, maintains that Schwitters was considered throughout the mid 1950s and 60s, as significant an influence as Duchamp on postwar artists despite shifts in the artworld, and his 'relative absence' in the late 20th Century. Significant solo and group shows throughout the late 1940s and 50s on collage and abstraction, along with Motherwell's *Anthology of The Dada Painter's and Poets* in 1951 brought Schwitters to American attention by the early 1950s. To glimpse the intersections of this period, with which the collage film *Recreation* is consonant, it is worth quoting from the characterization by Seitz (1961, p.87) associated with the MoMA 'Art of Assemblage', 1961, exhibition,

The current wave of assemblage owes at least as much to abstract expressionism (with its dada and surrealist components) as it does to dada directly, but it is nevertheless differently oriented: it marks a change from a subjective, fluidly abstract art toward a revised association with environment. The method of juxtaposition is an appropriate vehicle for feelings of disenchantment with the slick international idiom that loosely articulated abstraction has tended to become, and the social values that this situation reflects. The technique of collage has always been a threat to the approved media of oil

painting, carving, and casting. Inherent in Kurt Schwitters' *Merz* collages, objects, environments, and activities (which, in various ways, all incorporated the spectator and the life around him into the fabric and structure of the work) was an impatience with the line that separated art from life. The medium of which Schwitters must be recognized as *le grand maître*, still expanding after more than forty years, cannot be dismissed as the affectation of a group of incompetents. It is an established mode of communication employing words, symbols, and signs, as freely as it does pigments, materials and objects. Wordlessly associative, it has added to abstract art the vernacular realism that both Ingres and Mondrian sought to exclude by the process of abstraction.

Before turning to Breer's collage film, *Recreation*, 1956 a fast-paced one-and-a-half minute, 16mm film, it should be reiterated that Breer's earlier work *Form Phases IV*, 1954 already begins to express difficulties with geometric abstraction. Diverted both toward the striking singularity of *neoplastic* abstraction, and, as Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) paraphrases, against the search for the 'final absolute' within the image's frame and formal relationships, the situation had nonetheless become, as explored earlier, ossified for Breer. The resoluteness of form in verticals and horizontals, and the purportedly asignifying planar staging of primary colors associated with the 'notion of absolute formal values seemed', Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) asserts, 'at odds with the number of variations [he] could develop around a single theme'.



Figure 43. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

Breer (1981, p.X) (Beauvais, 2006, p.157) (Coté, 1962, p.19) has intimated in several discussions that *Form Phases IV*, 1954 is the outcome of a *transmedium* and technical exploration starting with abstract painting-sketches collated within an index-card flip-book format, the filming of 'hand-made slides', and finally the leap into animation

film. The aesthetic logic of this trajectory and development of a single-frame aesthetic in film is made prominent with *Recreation*, 1956, and, one could argue, that the frame itself is abstracted and conceptually refigured. In relation to Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.17) argument distancing himself from the now overdetermined formalism of *neoplasticism*, one can observe that even this earlier film juxtaposes the influence of 'hardedge' non-objective forms with fleeting, minimal, and unassumingly expressive aspects of more lyrical abstraction. In these handcrafted never absolute geometric forms, expressive aspects surface in their aesthetic equivocality, as the world is

furtively brought back into the image and its collapsing frame.

Prior to this breach of the frame, seen in Figure 43, is a sequence in which a red triangle chases a white circle along the black frame around a white square, and once in the white square, the white circle is no longer visible and the frame collapses, concentrating on the red triangle. The irony of this sequence in an abstract film is evoked by the possible reference to the short animation associated with ‘An Experimental Study of Apparent Behaviour’ published in the American Journal of Psychology, 1944, (Heider & Simmel). It consists of simple geometric forms, two triangles, a circle and room-like space delineated within the frame by a few lines around which



the forms move and interact. The landmark study asking for descriptions of the film's occurrences overwhelmingly elicits not geometrical descriptions, but elaborate stories relating to social behaviour, as well as, indicating anthropomorphism of the non-human entities.

Figure 44. Breer, *Form Phases IV*.

The allusion of this largely disregarded chase sequence, irrespective of whether it is a direct reference to psychological studies or of a trope common to cartoon animation, nevertheless reasserts the importance of the audience's own experience, potentially broad reference points, and the variability of (perceptual) impressions. It could be argued that it makes an ostensible aside on the overdetermination of meaning by artist or expert, and would seem to be part of the movement also within kineticism and optical art in which the viewer becomes activated within the work's problematic. As part of the screening associated with the nascent modes of 'interactivity' emerging in *Le Mouvement* exhibition, 1955, highlighting reception may have been broadly apparent. And unlike the 'concrete orthodoxy' Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) comes to associate with Richter's work 'building everything into that rectangle', the handling of cinematic space shifts overtly with *Recreation* and becomes 'no longer necessarily a kind of enclosed composition in which the eye wandered through a prescribed maze of tensions'. How the nature of the film medium itself is conceived becomes fundamentally refigured with *Recreation*, along with Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.19) appreciation that it 'permits the combination in concentrated form of great quantities of diverse materials and interpretations.'

Despite the 'fairly rigid constructivist' (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.43) roots of the abstraction in the

Form Phases series, and the continued insistence that *Form Phases IV* uses ‘movement as a concrete compositional element with neither total sacrifice of non-kinetic elements nor recourse to anecdote’ (Breer, 1973b, p.70) (Tode, 2010, p.95), it nevertheless does not remain comfortably within these resolute parameters. The various forms of movement explored in *Form Phases IV* include the interjection of a flicker-like burst of frames, intermittent mechanical and rhythmically systematic motion (e.g. as of a conveyor-belt), as well as the fluidity of more organic hardedge forms in metamorphosis exhibiting Breer’s fascination for the logic of non-illusionistic, concrete abstraction.

Form Phases IV likewise draws on fictive tropes, such as the allusion of the chase scene, and equally displays a considerable delight in contradictions, and the liminal edges between figuration and non-objective abstraction. In contrast to modernism’s supposed construal of the absolute, Breer’s work is part of a period that begins to ask how form might be conceptualized when the logic of absolutes in its final analysis can no longer be assumed static. With its reappraisal, one might suggest, following Inwood (1992, p.28), that the relevance of the logic of abstraction shifts when considered not in terms of purist values ‘underlying the phenomenal world, but the conceptual system which becomes embedded in it’. Emergent in this early work is the sense of the competing values of figurative abstraction (e.g. Figure 22, 32) and the neo-avant-garde sense of parodic citation reducing, as O’Doherty (1973, p.193) argues, ‘absolutism to paradox, by bringing high art into everyday discourse’. In this light, such sequences as the chase scene demonstratively stir up a wily protest against the strictures of what the discourse of abstraction, during this period, had become.



Figure 45. Breer, *Recreation*, 1956, (1.30min, 16mm, 2 stills).

The continued emphasis upon *Form Phases IV* remains largely tied to the dominant discourse of the period as when, for instance, Tode (2010, p.95) reiterates, that it ‘picks up on the rigorous movements of the rectangles, planes and lines in Hans Richter’s *Rhythmus* films, but also makes

use of the element of color'. This perhaps conceals the tenacious sense evident even in *Form Phases IV* of Breer's own growing suspicions of the disputes of postwar abstraction. This is recollected when Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) argues that the 'battles were trivial, between hardedge and soft forms. I didn't think that this distinction was anything more than superficial... These schools developed around mannerisms really, rather than deep issues, since abstraction vs. figuration was a dead subject. That was settled. So then, it became a question of how do you approach God'.

Returning to the problem of absolutes, or of form and meaning in a transcendental dialectic becomes, for Breer (p.8), poised in terms of a discussion about the sense of the increasing arbitrary limitations of the frame, and the influence of Abstract Expressionists open-endedness with the 'surface extending beyond the frame'. Breer (Macdonald, p.25), furthermore loosely incorporates the notion of action painting as part of his approach to film,

Anyhow, the manifesto was about painting being fossilized action, whereas film was real action, real kinesis. Rather than a diagram or plan for change, film *was* change. And that was the exciting new thing about it. At the time I was thinking about Rauschenberg in particular, who was doing what I thought was essentially post-Schwitters combine paintings, not something new. Rauschenberg was being touted, but I felt I was doing real collages that had all the Rauschenberg combinations but were also dynamic and rhythmic, a real step forward from Schwitters, who I admired very much.



Figure 46. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

The initially sequential trajectory and metamorphosing flow of the largely non-objective paper-cuts (or animation cut-outs) and abstract painterly compositions that emerge with the *Form Phases* series, take an appreciably altered tack with the collage aesthetics and kinetic optic of *Recreation*. Here, Breer (Coté, 1962, pp.18-19) interrogates the ways in which the 'cinema medium is just an

arbitrary thing' and in this manner, abstraction in *Recreation* becomes refigured by movement, time, the 'eclecticism' of animation-film-as-collage, and the 'heterogeneity' of the photographic basis of animation-film (Beauvais, 2006, p.165). It is set against the medium as a tool for the 'reproduction of natural movements' and the continuity of motion espoused by conventional animation-film. It is built, rather, around what Breer (pp.18-19) discusses as 'non-rational' associations and a disruptive 'anti-continuity'. In contrast to the former *neoplastic* influences, when regarding the lowbrow *joie de vivre* of experimental animation at play in *Recreation*, its 'filmic short-circuitry' is often asserted, by Lebrat (1999, p.76) and others, to convey a provocative Dadaist impulse and humour.

Recreation is a kinetic collage film that consists of a successive collision of quick-fire sequences, rapid cuts and single-frame images of incongruent elements. It is generally regarded as a breakthrough or pivotal work by figures, such as, Sitney (avant-garde film historian and theorist) and Jonas Mekas (artist filmmaker and impassioned advocate of the form) both central to the journal *Film Culture*, and Anthology Film Archives' *Essential Cinema* Repertory project that aimed to canonize avant-garde cinema. The work is felt to be key in terms of Breer's single-frame process and a significant contribution 'to the exploration of the thresholds of rapid montage,' for which Breer's animated film oeuvre was recognized with the Eleventh Independent Film Award, 1972 in the associated journal *Film Culture* (1973, p.23). Sitney's (2002, p.272) formal emphasis stresses that Breer's films present a 'heightened awareness of the operation of the single frame as the locus of tension between the static and the moving.'

This germinal phase of Breer's oeuvre is situated, more extensively, by Sitney (1973, p.35) within his distinctive cinematic categorization of the 'European alternative graphic tradition' in the lineage, for instance, of Léger's cubist film *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924, which encompasses, 'both the radical modernism of Richter, Léger, Duchamp and Eggeling, and the whimsical fascination with illusions of movement and transformation that motivated Cohl.' Sitney (2000b, pp.8, 328, 341) has elsewhere mentioned Breer's 'pioneer sensibility' in relation to the single-frame flicker film, as a 'forefather' of structural film and, with the prevalence of kinetic concerns, has been uneasily aligned with the highly organic, experimental films and kinetic sculptures of Len Lye.

Nevertheless, with the still palpable prevalence of avant-gardism fueling the drive toward innovation, Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.6) recalls the developments in art associated with the representational problem and abstract treatment of movement, 'you could not show art without having some kind of manifesto. So everyone had the feeling that they were doing something at least a little bit different.' Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.40) however astutely demystifies the situation by which the breakthrough of his work had perhaps become overdetermined, qualifying

candidly that he ‘never claimed any firsts’ for highlighting the single-frame principal of animation film, nor made ‘any case for the device in itself. It’s basically a gimmick, but if you carry a gimmick as far as I did, it becomes a *style* of sorts.’

In this manner, it could be argued that carrying the ‘gimmick’ of the single-frame aesthetic of film animation as far as Breer does, becomes an integral part of the development of a signature-style, or more interestingly, is indicative of what O’Doherty (1973, pp.201, 203-204) has called *process thinking*. This is discussed in relation to neo-avant-garde artists’, such as Rauschenberg, and associated with emerging aspects of conceptualism that draws into its nexus the conventions of looking.

One could also argue that Breer’s mode of distancing is created in a manner that partly has roots in the older sense of abstraction that stems out of comprehensive forms of research and experimentation central to the development of the work. Consider, for instance, the underlying polemic of *neoplasticism* or *De Stijl* as deliberated by Mondrian¹⁰¹ regarding the displacement of the centrality of the artist (expressionism) or the author-function as the specificity of the work. Rather, it was searching for the essentiality of the work’s style or ‘personality’ in a dialectic with the situation of the age that would begin to affectively speak, with the aim of effecting potentially profound transformations. Nevertheless, with the search for a universal language of abstraction abandoned, it becomes the rejected relic; the impossible beauty of the modernist ideal.

While Breer’s (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.39) stance of disregarding the originality of his exploitation of single-frame basis of film appears unassuming, it is still underscored by an extensive examination of the material. To this effect, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.39) states,

Oh, I fell into a certain dead end in painting, at that time, and the neoplastic ideal. Films were very liberating, so I took advantage of it. I want to see some things I’d never seen before. Actually, those collage films were in the same spirit as the abstract paintings, trying to distill the essence of the medium. For me, film was another medium that permitted mixing all this extraneous stuff, ideas and words and configurative elements that I couldn’t justify putting in paintings anymore [...] but still, very basically, abstract, you know, examining the material, what was possible in film.

In this manner, Breer’s appreciation of the practical and technical foundations of animation film, as well as, pre-cinematic devices (flip-books, mutoscopes), is played out in an irreverent manner. It reflects a resistance to the appeal of newness in terms of the cultural appetite for technological

¹⁰¹ In *Trialogue*, 1920, Mondrian (1987b, p.116) contemplates the relationship between artistic individualism and universality, or art that captures the *spirit of the age* becoming a *living reality ‘as beauty’* continuing, ‘increasingly the work of art speaks for itself. Personality is displaced; each work of art becomes a personality instead of each artist.’

novelty that veers towards ‘everchanging sameness’ (Adorno, 2005, p.238) and Breer (1981, p.x) likewise advises, ‘not to pay it excessive homage.’

Breer’s continued engagement with the mechanics of abstraction in film, with its recourse to figuration, and the contingency of the way these problems coalesce, along with his recognition of the pleasures these dynamics contain means that technical aspects are not sublated to the tendency to systematize or structure the process, or medium. In a mode that anticipates yet is already diverging from structural film, Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.167) states that the ‘pretense of making a visual structure’ which aimed in part to complicate spontaneity, would also seem to be directed at complicating the modernist conviction of progress, often depicted as the reverence for the unrelenting momentum of mechanical rhythm.

For this Breer (p.167) turns to Richter’s notion of ‘rhythm being an emotional ingredient’. The rapid montages and single-frame aesthetics of *Recreation*, which simulate the apparatus of film to the point of excess, is contrasted to more tersely sustained shots of distinctive tones and types of movement. On the broader tempos of motion, Breer (p.167) continues that, ‘the way one transcends numerical repetitions or metric cutting is by considering the true impact of each image. [...] The effect of recognition and how long it takes will affect how you cut the film (to achieve the effect of metric consistence or a beat).’

This is relevant in view of Breer’s (Levine, 1973, p.15) assertion that his rapid montage films like *Recreation* needn’t be seen ‘several times to be appreciated’ which allows for it to be encountered, and glimpsed by the viewer. Despite its single-frame construction, and conversely its ‘fracturing, shattering the image’ (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.44) of film’s continuity, Breer’s emphasis within such films is not dependent upon a frame-by-frame breakdown. Rapid cuts and flicker frames during projection are not comprehended individually as such, but become synthesized as part of the work’s texture, shifts of light, spatial tones, and the movement and intervals between disparate forms at the running speed of twenty-four frames-per-second. At a certain level, Breer’s (Coté, 1962, p.19) approach evokes a potentially radical ambiguity whose ostensible destruction of the certainty and conventionality of meaning becomes part of *Recreation’s* initially fleeting ‘formlessness’.

Recreation is enigmatically held between its machinic torrent, the eddies of its breakdown and the constructed, ostensibly ‘natural’ trajectories of motion afforded in different ways by live-action and animation. Objects in *Recreation* are on occasion provoked into short-lived action that fleetingly flashes by or when momentarily sustained become suspended like an afterimage in the predominant anti-kinetic torrent of its image. In unmistakable punctuations of *Recreation’s*

symptomatically frenetic animation which eludes any semblance of natural movement, and as part of the film's darkly humorous reversal of the tenets of conventional animation correlated to illusion of life, it is, rather, the capture of inanimate objects in real time that become 'animated'. In one such pause, a crumpled paper of spurned and suppressed possibilities unfurls slightly and gradually then ceases. In another break, a sense of the instability of the image is conjured when the *flat-bed picture-plane* (Steinberg, 2002) upon which soft materials, such as, paint rags, and rope begin to untangle or arc slackly across the work-surface and subtly revert back to the more traditional vertical orientation of the picture-plane, as these things become ostensibly weighted, and slowly dragged down, out of the frame, as if by gravity.



Figure 47. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

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*A Brief Differentiation of the Reflexive (Anti)Kinetics of Recreation
from the Modernist Optimism of Ballet Mécanique's Machine Aesthetics*

When asked about Léger's influence Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.164) explains that, while he is no doubt indebted, when he 'absorbed *Ballet Mécanique* it was subconsciously', continuing that he 'did not realize how strongly it was in fact, until later because I thought I had developed Léger's whole theory myself.' On a technical level, Léger's filmic techniques, such as, rapid jump-cuts, unusual camera angles etc., have indeed been elaborated upon by Breer and to a considerable extent intensified. However, *Recreation* also presents a pronounced shift from the particular avant-garde relation in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* to the modern splendour and pleasure taken in the polished reflective sheen, and driving coordinated rhythm of machinery. The prominent technological framework in *Recreation* could be argued to figure, instead, 1950s anxieties about the new post-war extension of mechanization and automation, as it plays in a pre-pop mode with the intensified commodification of the everyday, straddling the legacy of European traditions (e.g.

neoplasticism, dadaism, ‘new realism’) and the influence of American abstract expressionism, presaging neo-avant-garde debates in art.



Figure 48. Breer, *Recreation*.

Recreation raises the spectre of technology in a way that also points to the *anti-aesthetic* problematic of *deskilling* within art itself, which has largely become associated with the conceptual model of the Duchampian *readymade*, but holds this problematic in tension with the resilience of aesthetic

concerns explored through the utilization of found objects exemplified by Schwitters’ mode of collage. Reflecting the changing conditions of the mid 1950s, the optic of *Recreation* registers the increasingly contested, conceptualized space of art itself beyond the traditional scale of the artist’s craft-based studio. And while the tone of the film must be considered as distinct from the later 1960s, ‘Minimalist surge getting under way’ of which Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.165) takes note, it is of interest to turn to Smithson’s (1996, p.105) critical reflection on the shifting focus in art practices to industrial, technological and material processes and of how, ‘in the late 50s and early 60s the private studio notion of ‘craft’ collapsed.’ In this light, I would argue that while Breer’s process utilizes certain strategies which reflexively evoke the mechanics of film and the filmic vernacular associated with Léger’s ‘cubist cinema’ (Lawder, 1975), Breer’s post-cubist collage and montage strategies have none of the modernist’s assurance and largely undeterred optimism for a humanized machine aesthetic. This is apparent and advocated in both Léger’s works and writings despite his experience of the mechanization of warfare in the trenches of WWI.

Furthermore, the humor of Breer’s eclectic cinematic collage, which develops out of an associative play of differences and parallels in materials, objects, and procedures, is in contrast to the potentially disconcerting leveling between things suggested by the underlying motivation of Léger’s mode of abstraction. While this is part of the diverse ways the avant-garde grapples with the experience of subjugation and subjectivation within the surge of modernization, the importance of the accessibility of art posited in Léger’s writings, and the pleasure captured in *Ballet Mécanique* of geometrically rhythmic harmonies suggests a desire for integration. Richards (2003, p.81) in ‘Léger and the Purist Object’, furthermore, points towards a more unsettling diminishment of the ‘qualitative differences between phenomena, be they buildings, machines or even the human body’.



Figure 49. Léger & Murphy, *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924, (19min, 16mm).

Yet it is also as part of the 1920s social upheaval, that one might touch on the film *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924 to offset the way in which it is widely considered an exemplar of abstract film or ‘cinéma pure’ that returns the photographic aspect of film to its

elements of visual rhythm in light, spatial composition, and movement by its early foregrounding of a range of cinematic techniques. The non-narrative montage construction of the film can be considered more broadly, as alluded to earlier, as part of Léger’s (1973, pp.109-13) extension of a machinic optic and melding of the individual subject in the object world of modernity, as elucidated in his treatise on ‘New Realism’, 1935. The film traverses both the treatment of circumstances, such as labor and leisure, as well as, objects within an often isolated and non-hierarchical focus using close-ups and other spatio-temporal image distortions. Some of these objects are simultaneously associated with the body, whose pared-down forms, and notational status¹⁰² suggests its fragmentation, simulation, and replication, which is interwoven, and repeated, creating mechanically rhythmic affiliations, which are, nonetheless, humanistically reconstructed as an exultant cubist dance of new realism.¹⁰³

Such segments of short rapid-fire duration are expressively intercut, or shot with kaleidoscopic, multifaceted distortions and evocative of the bustle of funfairs and window displays, for example, the high-key round white shape of a 1920s straw boaters hat with black ribbon against a black background is intercut with a pointy white loafer shoe, a triangular shape pointing up then down and intercut with a white circle. Also interposed are more complicated objects, such as, pumping mechanisms, swinging discs, nobs, and gyrating angles. The white keys of a dark typewriter, white numerals on a black table, cut-off mannequin legs pirouetting upside down and right-side up in white tights with garters are graphically reversed elsewhere, for instance, with jump-cuts of vacillating and teetering rows of dark wine bottles on a white background. Such rapidly cut sections are often said to have set a formal precedent for artists, such as Breer, along with its utilization of an *allover* screen, and as Tode (2010, p.89) discusses, its repetitive montage presages the film loop.

¹⁰² This utilization displayed in his ‘mature’ paintings after the mid 1910s of a ‘single notational element for every object represented’ is discussed in Foster et al. (2004, p.205) as a strategy borrowed from Analytical Cubism.

¹⁰³ Image Source: (Léger & Dudley, 1924)

Interestingly, the most memorable instance of a markedly repeated segment in *Ballet Mécanique* strikingly contrasts with the optimistic play of modernist mechanization and the whirling carnivalesque diversions of some of the footage. While the image suggests the problem of the disparity in modernization's reach and the unevenness of its felt advantages, this does not necessarily undercut the gusto with which it is mainly embraced. This segment is often emphasized in primarily structural or formalist terms, as a reference between the figure's movement up stairs, reinforced by the jump-cut and repetition, and the stepped movement of film frames through the apparatus which, while discerning, tends to elide its more complex



operation and the potentially broader scope of its filmic vocabulary that raises the question of film's possible 'new realism' in a more expansive manner.

Figure 50. Léger, *Ballet Mécanique*.

In this scene a woman remains fated to the Sisyphean task of repeatedly labouring up a section of backstreet stairs in her long

gathered skirt, heaving a bulky hessian sack over one shoulder and with genial vexation her free hand starts to gesture in recognition, it would seem, of the perception of her predicament under the camera's gaze. By extension, the viewer who was initially accommodated by this casual exchange becomes not simply distanced, but distanciated by the device. As the gesture of the woman's genial vexation, becomes part of a more complex situation it takes on an aspect that is increasingly wary. With this increasing, unfolding tension the viewer becomes voyeuristically implicated within the dynamics of the image by the uncommonly deft use of the perceptual modifications of repetition.

Responding to Breer's (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.42) statement about the importance of the 'historical inheritance' of disciplines and thresholds tied to 'conventions', as well as, the violation of such limitations, Sitney (1973, p.30) sidesteps the way the broader aesthetic implications of such involvements are allied to contemporary art movements, such as, neo-avant-garde *assemblage*, and kineticism. *Recreation*, likewise, encompasses the nascent neo-avant-garde's conceptual interrogation rooted in 'critical-formal concerns with artistic definition' (Osborne, 2002, p.17) in which the troubling of visual perception is allied to the disruption of established categories.

Recreation's fragmentation, fleeting imagery, and evocation of an immersion into, or enactment of

artistic process, simultaneously presents an ‘attack on *permanent values*’ which O’Doherty (1973, pp.195-6) has associated with the idiom of *junk art* and *assemblage*. Breer’s work (like aspects of Rauschenberg’s collage discussed by O’Doherty) courts as its ‘material’ not only everyday objects, but perceptual habits and conventions, which are countered by visual and formal innovations, whose aberrations can offer a striking momentary sense of divergence from the horizon of expectations. The initial value of such an approach, however, may have been largely misconstrued when not grasped as an integral part of its aesthetic endeavour to complicate art’s presence-ing and permanence, but, was instead reduced to the duration of novelty, compounded by the use of film-animation, a traditionally non-art and popular mass-medium.

Associating thresholds primarily with visual perception and the work’s ‘creation and decreation of illusions’, Sitney (1973, p.31) continues that this is ‘more vital to Breer’s aesthetic than that of ‘conventions’. Conventions are, in fact, a means for him to come upon a threshold more immediately.’ Yet, beyond the more fundamentally oppositional verve of its ‘creation and decreation’, *Recreation* presents an ironized lamentation through its internalizations that would seem to touch on the loss of modernism’s transcendent quest with abstraction. Against the once-imaginably deliberate and direct procession toward the object or to its timeless absolute values and singularity of meaning, arising in its stead is a sense of immersion within the material of film, and the profoundly unruly resistance of the object.

This problematic is evoked by the way *REcreation* is handwritten on the film’s title-card, as *regarding creation*. In *Recreation* the self-reflexive trajectory (stemming out of constructive art influences of *neoplasticism*, Richter etc.) would seem to be refigured as an ideational emphasis on film’s single-frame basis. This becomes complicated in practice by the spatial cut-up discontinuity of its compositions, which activate its anti-/kinetic collage, and reconstruct the illusory movement of cinema, as the static, principally motionless, yet turbulent stream of its image. This suggests an *affirmative negation* (Osborne) of the industrialized serial logic of the filmstrip.

The viewer’s perceptual limits are quite literally pushed, and become apparent in conjunction with the mechanics of the film’s image. However, this differs markedly from the largely celebratory cubist sense of the machinic presented by Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (previously discussed). Film’s inherently *transmedium* condition is determinately explored in Breer’s *Recreation* as part of the transformation of the bounds of art itself, whose conceptual and perceptual modes are nonetheless wryly crafted, with a humour that affectively opens onto the world at large. Breer’s mediation of historical inheritances, although generally unrecognized within the artworld, also stands in contrast to Sitney’s (2000b, pp.328, 341) more formal emphasis that isolates the ‘objects of his formal manipulation’. Such an interpretation is reminiscent of the chiefly

subsidiary status with which Sitney (2002, p.348) treats image content when he comes to define structural films with Breer's work as precursor.



Figure 51. Breer, *Recreation*.

The allegorical fragmentation of *Recreation* is held between the machinic structuration of the frame, and the inclusion of chance in the process of its montage. Breer's wide-ranging, processual and experimental approach utilizing popular materials, devices, and technical means is suggested in the interview when Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.44) describes, for instance, how he, 'mixed in everything, every discipline I could think of, very conspicuously'. It is this evocative multiplicity, and transcategorical sensibility within his image practice, initiated and singularly expressed in *Recreation* that has the trace of Schwitters' elegant collage aesthetic which suggests an almost sublime moment while remaining within the quotidian, fragmented, ephemera of matter. The fortuitous nature of the resultant, composited imagery of *Recreation*, however, destabilizes the decisive moment of collage associated with Schwitters' approach and despite his influence upon the *assemblage* movement, this sense of cohesion is actively precluded by the open-ended gaze which was later sought. To this extent, *Recreation* produces in its conflated, compacted, flickering imagery a sense of photographic excess and the shattering of film's inherent sequentiality, about which Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) declares that he endeavors 'to attack the basic material, to tear up film, pick up the pieces and rearrange them.'

Recreation's Kinetic Optic

Despite postwar art's expansion and conceptual breach of disciplinary boundaries, Breer's work nevertheless, risked the accusation of novelty attributed to the impulse of 'setting painting into motion' and 'retinal titillation' which has been associated by Buchloh et al. (Foster et al., 2004,

p.418) with *Le Mouvement* exhibition. This condition of the neo-avant-garde is identified more generally in ‘Modernist Novelty and the Neo-avant-garde’ by North (2013, pp.176, 225) and it could be argued that Breer would seem to acknowledge such allegations by playing it as a potential game (a form of recreation), that conversely presents a refusal of the ‘market capitalization’ of his artwork. The largely low-value, non-art status of film within art institutions during this period and its critical exclusion compounded the effect on the recognizability of the operations within Breer’s early ‘lowbrow’ collagist turn. Unlike the status of Painting’s incorporation of non-art elements, it presented the difficulty in this period of exhibiting non-art elements within a largely non-art medium.

The previous extent of the established divisions of mediums is difficult to comprehend today in an era that has come to broadly champion the plurality of a mixed- multi- inter- media, as well as of cross- and inter-disciplinarity. Given this situation, a vital aspect of the consideration of *Recreation* is how it speaks of the broad changes in the artworld and art’s reception, brought about in part by art’s institutional critique associated with the readymade object, along with the pre-pop inclusion of everyday materials and commonplace things. Breer’s practice, in turn, refracts particular aspects of our own *post-conceptual* juncture and renewed debates about materiality and (post)aesthetics.

Breer’s (1981, p.IX) introduction to ‘The Shoestring Animator’, a beginners guide for auteur filmmakers, also suggests a relation to art for animation-film while not being especially secured by it, and whose innovation is borne not only out of necessity but also a modicum of destruction, deliberate disremembering, self-creation and recreation, ‘there was no manuals for what I was trying to do, and even though [...] there was already a tradition of abstract film dating from the

twenties, nonconformity was the basis for that tradition. So I had to invent my own techniques.’



Figure 52. Breer, *Recreation*.

The filmstill likely a snapshot of Breer in racing goggles displays his panache for speed. Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.3) mentions driving on desolate, fuel-rationed postwar Paris roads, adding hydraulic brakes to his

car, and considered entering motor racing, before getting ‘serious about being an artist’. The improvised irony of this snapshot in the film may or may not be visible. As a single-frame it

would go by too fast to be seen when screened at a standard frame rate of twenty-four frames-per-second.

Due to the diversity and pace of the film's kinetic onslaught, *Recreation* presents, as Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.163) indicates, an 'anti-kinetic' dynamic. With the denial of live-action's spatio-temporal continuity intrinsic to 'natural' movement, the apparatus is brought, by dint of its machinic vision, as Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.44) describes, to 'a point where things go by so fast that they start standing still'. Breer (1974, p.35) furthermore discusses that when the operations of film are no longer confined to imitation, the aesthetics of motion is thus rendered evident through arresting 'time intervals and space changes'.



Figure 53. Breer, *Recreation*.

In this manner the film's approach would seem to traverse aspects of what Breer held to be Mondrian's post-cubist *neoplastic* abstraction, its insistence on the planar, the square, and what becomes understood as the ascertainment of the medium's fundamental principles, such as, the film frame. Yet, the professed *neoplastic* constraints of the block

color cut-outs with which *Form Phases IV* grapples is reconfigured, and, as the title *Recreation* also suggests, presents with its digressionary form, forays into territory associated with 'disorder'. (Coté, 1962, p.19) The red block-colour and non-rectilinear paper-cuts (Figure 53) give a sense of its origin in and leap out of the 'hardedge' concrete abstraction that occupies the *Form Phases* series.

Formal concerns, such as the positive function of negative space, continue to play a significant role, sometimes as the stark white cast of crumpled paper, serenely even greys, or expansive cuts of black. The articulated ruler pictured is at once, comically concertinaed, but also suggests a certain measure of the image, while equally being one of a myriad objects and paper-cut forms that may be caught sight of. Instanced in various shapes and at such a speed, the individually collaged frames *recreate* a new composite image in rapid flux. Nonetheless, the at times vibrantly crisp or softly torn reds, and warm ligneous hues recurrent within the film's palette, become within the flux of its compacted imagery, redolent of the richly worked textures of Schwitters' collages.

With careening high spirits and against the systemization of form, Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.19) eclectic approach to the nexus of film form is rooted in an engagement that is manifestly, 'against boredom. [...] I'd much rather anger them, though I should say the eventual goal is pleasure'. For Breer playing off, not only the frame, but also the multifaceted nature of the filmic form with a re-invention of techniques within the framework of the moving-image, along with perceptual *games* that are at times whimsical and associative, comprise the integrity of the experimental activity out of which *Recreation* is generated.

In this way, the ideal and cathartic reductions by which art was lit as a beacon against the broader tragic disequilibrium of society, as Mondrian once proposed, becomes with the diversionary pursuits of *Recreation*, part of a marked antithesis to the systematization of modernist form. Such modes in modern art, as well as modernism's often unchallenging enthusiasm for industrialized 'progress', became correlated with the suppression of the more complex facets of life and labor, an evasion that was also extended to the domestic sphere. Such modes of attention in art, which are not pitched from a comfortable distance, are also associated with Surrealism and feature in Benjamin's (2008a, pp.238, 239) revaluation of 'Dream Kitsch,' 1927. The pursuit of such a mode 'is less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things' into the heart and habits of modern life, and follows along 'the contours of the banal', which furnishes interior experience with 'its forms and apparatus', and crucially for Benjamin, 'takes in the energies of an outlived world of things'.

In this track it could also be emphasized that the technical, *transmedium* exploration of film had allowed Breer to open up film's linearity like a stack of cards to random juxtapositions, and cyclical phases brought about by the conceptual game of its random shuffling, and perhaps in this way could, as Lebrat (1999, p.75) suggests in a footnote without further comment, be rediscovered in terms of the Duchampian *readymade*. As Breer (1974, p.35) states, 'my animation is mainly related to art and its conventions'. His mediation of art's discourse can be seen as an extensive exploration of the animation-film 'medium' despite the continued priority of traditional mediums during the 1950s. This could also be considered in terms of the more radical gesture of the *readymade*, as a conceptual and cinematic object which potentially acts as an intervention into art's discourse as a form of institutional critique.

Even as Lebrat (p.75) notes that the film was 'not understood when it was released and provoked hostile reactions' during its premiere screening in the mid 1950s, one might also note that interpretation of the ostensibly experimental image-content of the film is almost entirely missing from subsequent considerations of the work. Breer's film *Recreation*, can be re-examined more particularly for how the image-content dynamizes and is inflected by the form of *Recreation*, and

crucially underpins its criticality. To develop an analysis of *Recreation* in relation to the contemporaneous moment of its form and to ‘uncover’, as Lebrat (p.76) advocates, ‘a more *political* reading’, it is necessary to touch on the critical potential of Schwitters’ *Merz* collages. Beyond the criticism of its aestheticism, the extent to which discarded materials and commodity fragments of modernity have become incorporated into new frameworks becomes furthermore pertinent for an appreciation of the neo-avant-garde influenced by him.

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Breer (Obrist, 2001, p.3) working in the marginalized, non-traditional form of animation-film would seem to determinately signal by the collage aesthetic of *Recreation* not a Dadaist *anti-art* gesture but a ‘heartfelt’ connection to Schwitters’ *Merz* that extends to the paradoxical transformation of pictorial regimes which nonetheless have a degree of persistence. Schwitters (1951, p.60) in *Merz*, 1920 and Richter (1965) throughout *Dada Art and Anti-Art* make steadfast refusals of the once predominant focus in Dada of an un-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic framework. Schwitters’ collage has been considered a ‘reaction’ and is differentiated from, for instance, the figurative compositions and ‘revolutionary montage’ of Dada photomontage. (Buchloh, 1982, p.46) This assessment moreover persists and underpins the later assertion in *Art Since 1900* (Foster et al., 2004, p.220) that its approach lacked the ‘political commitment to Dada.’

By positing his approach to collage as an expansion of *painting*, not its radical disarticulation, Schwitters’ stance continues to be held against the more radically conceptual notion of the *readymade*, and considered a ‘reaction to the total transformation of painting into a technological object’. (pp.221, 220) Schwitters’ impetus which, for instance, by ‘never reducing the compositional structure or the reading order to a fully homogenized mechanically produced image’ is felt to duly return, ‘to an allegorical reading of techno-scientific utopianism by countering it with a position of melancholic contemplation’. The avowedly heteronomous determinations of Dadaism’s *anti-art* stance, the agitational works and performance of striking scandals that predominate in Dadaism is pitted against the sustained aesthetic sense of autonomy wrought by the mode of abstraction of Schwitters’ collage-paintings. Furthermore, the underlying critique of humanism that is allied to the modernist elaboration of mechanomorphic forms is felt compromised because his collage-paintings remain underpinned by aspects of expressionism, and an artistic awareness of formal composition that attains a degree of legibility within traditional regimes. To this extent Schwitters maintains an overt tension between painterly ‘manual inscription and technologically based textual production’ (p.221) of ephemera.

In lieu of the striking scandals of the so-called *anti-aesthetic* Dadaism, and despite being deemed by the Dada stalwart Heulsenbeck (1951a, p.244) as reprehensibly romantic in its ties to the

‘sentimental resistance’ of expressionism, Schwitters’ mode of collage, nevertheless, took into its aesthetic form the conditions of modern life. Nor does Schwitters’ mode of working succumb to ‘a comfortable life free from content or strife [...] typical of people who prefer their armchair to the noise of the street’, as Heulesenbeck’s (p.244) attack on etiolated expressionism maintains, but is exerted defiantly in the face of modern life’s increasing systemization, and the ensuing ravages, fragmentation and contractions of war.

Breer’s particular pre-pop inclusivity in *Recreation* associated with collage would seem, at one level, to maintain an aesthetic integrity akin to Schwitters’ collages, with its self-reflexive critique of arts’ bounds, as it rescues from oblivion its collection of commonplace and discarded ephemera. Schwitters’ expansion of painting, by the medium of collage becomes transposed within Breer’s moving-image by a further expansion of art and the potential destabilization of traditional mediums. Yet despite this aspect of *Recreation*’s destabilization, (which is in part associated with the broader impact on art of photographic and time-based media), the material and aesthetic, craft-based possibilities do not become for Breer relinquished, (even with art’s prevailing conceptualism).

The alleged sense of the aestheticism, ‘the meditative contemplation of reification’ (Buchloh, 1982, p.43) or the ‘melancholic contemplation’ (Foster et al., 2004, p.220) critically linked to Schwitters’ collage is touched upon here, but not it should be stressed, in terms of a mode of withdrawal, nor inaction that succumbs to the ‘melancholic subjectivity of late capitalism’ (Pensky, 1993, p.208). Following other theorists, Benjamin’s notion of the allegorical condition and imagination will be reconsidered as proposing a critical opening. As Benjamin (1998, pp.28-29) writes of the digressive immersion into detail, whose determination, as in *Recreation*, is not ultimately to inspire a salvational reverie, but rather ‘the absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure is its primary characteristic. Tirelessly the process of thinking makes new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object. This continual pausing for breath is the mode most proper to the process of contemplation. [...] This form can be counted successful only when it forces the reader to pause and reflect.’

The ‘manifest concern’ of Schwitters’ work, Buchloh (Foster et al., 2004, pp.220-21) states is ‘for a continuation of painting as a space of contemplative experience. As Schwitters never tired of saying, the technological objects, the found materials in his work, only functioned in order to conceive of a new type of *painting*. They were never theorized as readymades that would displace painting, [...] or as chromatic objects that dismantle the legacy of visual intensity in Expressionist art. In all instances, Schwitters’ ultimate goal remained one of conceiving what he called a “painting for contemporary experience”.’ (p.220) One might also note that the use of the phrase

‘contemplative experience’ is here likely associated with the danger presented in, for instance, Debord’s (1983, p. Theses #1) notion of the *spectacle*, which perceives in the ‘contemplative’ state of viewing, an active dispossession of the subject where ‘all that was once directly lived has become mere representation.’

Nevertheless, the narrow oppositional premise (spanning from Huelsenbeck to Buchloh) that insinuates Schwitters’ aesthetic collages are without an adequate urgency is likewise supposed to saturate the condition of art’s conventionalization, and institutionalized-reconciliation by the neo-avant-garde influenced by Schwitters, such as Rauschenberg, and one might add, Breer. The autonomy of critical art might, however, be understood in a dialectic formed between its own comprehensibility and in light of questions that probe the power relations and function of the museum, along with its instituted historical discourses and (categorical) parameters. Situating the neo-avant-garde’s mode of spatializing history with its constellation of art historical antecedents amongst its objects and fragments becomes pertinent in Breer’s case. His recourse in animation to the discourse of art by the aesthetic mediation and assemblage of painting, kineticism, absolute film, animated cartoons, and the everyday becomes crucial to the recognisability of *Recreation*.

As part of a rejoinder to the above criticisms of Schwitters’ collage, such an approach could also be argued to correspond with the (radical modernist) liberty sought from mimetic representation of a dominant culture bent upon war. In this manner, Schwitters’ work redeploys the techniques and craft of the *monteur* toward an expanded sense of painting objects and sculptural environments that capture the new intensities of modern life. His approach could be characterized as a modernism of collected ephemera attuned to the interiors of the metropolitan street. Yet, the restlessness of the objects seized within its frame insinuates a broader malaise and underlying disorder of capitalist modernity’s surface, and indicates, for instance, the era’s recent surge in the production and distribution of print-media, packaged commodities etc. Allied with the refuse of material society, Schwitters’ collage touches on Benjamin’s (1992a, p.168) description of the collector’s ‘Sisyphean task which consisted of stripping things of their commodity character by means of his possession of them’. This is observed in Schwitters’ treatment of commercially printed matter and bric-a-brac, but also intriguingly of organic items, such as, feathers, locks of hair etc. Yet, it is the often conflicted, intricately worked possession of the everyday that intimates the vestiges of an expressionism for which his work has also been maligned. Likened perhaps to romantic aesthetic reflection upon the fragment, it stages the thwarted idealism and longing for the absolute by inviting reflection upon its determinate incompleteness.

Nevertheless the problematic of the ‘directly lived’ does not become ‘mere representation’ but is

integral to Schwitters' processual approach to collection and collage, which returns to the conditions of modern life, pertinently presenting a foil to its increasing systematization. The details, material surfaces, textures and fragments of found objects are not only utilized but worked intensively by weathering, over-painting, nailing, and gluing into compositions that move beyond the figure-ground relations of synthetic cubism toward non-hierarchical relations of an *overall* field. The image halted in a moment when the intrinsic logic of the artwork's rhythm becomes manifest, between for instance, its parts and the whole, or the split-level perception of the indexical effects and the a-logically transformed semblance of its details. The labyrinthine habitual energies of Schwitters' work and the painterly, expressive embrace of its appropriation grapples with the sense of flux, indeterminacy, and the hard-edged arbitrariness of the commonplace, which is redirected toward the non-systematic, toward the rare moment and striking potency of an object held in the midst of being de- and re-coded.

The underlying ironic tension regarding the transcendence of form in *Recreation* is also suggested in terms of meaning, when considered in light of the ambiguity courted by the work which is not rooted in the 'bad positivism of meaninglessness' (Adorno, 1977, p.191) but in Breer's revelry in questioning orthodoxies and to an extent a determinate negation of certain meanings, and the certainty of meaning. This is made explicit by the still potentially provocative 'nonsense poetry' of the soundtrack, which nevertheless is held with a degree of ambivalence by Breer, and is superseded as he develops a more complex interplay between the sound and image tracks in subsequent films.

The sense of immediacy provoked by the form of *Recreation* is staged between the non-narrative, disparate accumulative velocity of the single-frame imagery and the competing speed of the audio-track's monotone French commentary, written and narrated by Noël Burch (film theorist). The disjunctive, collaged verse, which is styled loosely in the manner of a Dada-like sound poem, is at times descriptive, emphasizing the flat screen and limited depth within which the film's action takes place, as well as allusions beyond the screen by the perforations of its flat scene. At other times the words imply directives, whose 'nonsense poetry' and 'puns', as Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.26) has described it, intermittently careen into a correspondence with the imagery (see Appendix A for transcript).

It is worth loosely juxtaposing the role of language and subject of creation implicit within *Recreation* to Brakhage's lament on the fallen conception of language in *Metaphors on Vision* (quoted on pg. 140). Likewise, Benjamin (1996b, p.62) intersects the strong longing for a kind of

blissful paradisiacal immediacy by positing that existence without a relationship to language is an *idea* that ‘can bear no fruit’. Benjamin’s linguistic perspective on the biblical story of Genesis is, Friedlander (2012, p.16) argues, an allegorization of the ‘problematic relation to nature in language’. This fundamentally melancholic relation of language is, Ferber (2013, p.147) likewise argues, ‘inherent to creation’. Like Brakhage’s lament, and Breer’s Dada inspired sound poem, which would deem the bourgeois conception of a ‘language of means’ as an impoverishment of experience, Benjamin’s (1996b, p.65) radical critique further penetrates the limited understanding of communication to ‘the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being’. (Ferber, 2013, p.140)

Friedlander (2012, pp.15-16) clarifies Benjamin’s twofold relation between human language and nature as encompassing both the capacity to speak of nature while also having the function, in some sense, of realizing nature’s expressibility (of animate and inanimate objects), ‘How is the language of nature to be heard? [...] Man is not attentive to the language of nature by avoiding his own language altogether and relying on some direct and immediate intuition of things. [...] Benjamin’s understanding that man has the task of expressing the language of nature avoids both metaphysical realism and linguistic idealism, that is, both the idea that essences are fully formed and our language somehow corresponds to them, as well as the idea that we divide the world by imposing on it our own mental categories or concepts.’ To this extent language structured (nonsubjectively) by melancholy continues to suggest, as Ferber (2013, pp.128, 220) argues, an ethical function in the task of a commitment to the expressibility of things and to nature in its noninstrumentality, with language being understood ‘both as an expression of loss and a site for its recuperation.’

In an interview for the *Screening Room*, 1976, a TV series spotlighting independent cinema, Breer (Gardner, 1976) states to an American English-speaking audience that it is not important to ‘understand’ the French ‘nonsense’ poetry of the audiotrack. In this manner the significance of the voiced text regardless of one’s acquisition of language would seem to have more to do with the difficulty of its comprehension and is set against the use of commentary or narration that would easily anchor the image, re-establishing ‘figure-ground relationships’, whose visual hierarchies Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.22) criticizes as impoverished. Breer goes on to playfully confront the viewer’s expectations and trepidation about meaning and form and claims rather, ‘I want every square inch of the screen to be potentially active, alive – the whole damn screen.’

This impetus toward the activation of the screen with kinetic and optic sensibilities can be linked to the works associated with *Le Mouvement*, 1955 exhibition, which appreciably shifts the discourse of abstraction. This influence can be seen in the all-over fields of the *Form Phases IV*,

1954 series, and is evoked in sequences, such as the chase scene mentioned above into which elements of geometric abstraction and particularly the frame itself collapses. While, the *Form Phases* series ostensibly arises from or ‘succumbed to the same desire of setting painting into motion’ as has been unsympathetically noted of the novelty of many of the works associated with the *Le Mouvement* exhibition by Foster et. al. (2004, p.418), Breer’s mediation is increasingly reflexive. The crossdisciplinary treatment of animation from the modernist perspective of painting and vice versa becomes focused in *Recreation* on the mechanics of film that reframes the film’s single-frame basis. *Recreation* furthermore tacitly shares the pursuit prevalent in *Le Mouvement* of ‘Duchamp’s critique of the subjective authority of the artist as God-like creator’. (p.418) This becomes apparent, for instance, in the single-frame construct of *Recreation* that considerably obstructs the expressive content of the image, and disrupts the usual relations of narrative cinema, activating the situation of cinema, and the integral role of the viewer in the perceptual creation of work.

It is with this underlying critical sense of the materialization and instability of the film’s image-objects and form confronting the viewer and artist, that one might amplify Macdonald’s (1992, p.7) suggestion that, ‘the nature of human perception’ is the central focus of Breer’s works, and that such films as, *Form Phases IV*, 1954 and *Recreation*, 1956, ‘continually toy with our way of making sense of moving lines and shapes’. Even so, following on from the *Form Phases* series, it is apparent that *Recreation*’s cinematic image is no longer principally bound by the reductions of non-objective abstraction, or by absolute abstraction tied to ‘the necessary impossibility of the Absolute’s actualization’ (A.Benjamin, 2002, p.116), but is conceptually and materially energized by the assertive reintroduction of figuration and recourse to the expressive capacity of things and materials. Yet, while *Recreation* presents an array of diverse and fleeting objects, along with the sense that the film frame becomes an amassment of fragments, it is worth noting that the fundamental playfulness of the allegorical gaze can also occasion, as Ferber (2013, p.62) argues, with its ‘intense and serious preoccupation with the absolute’, a ‘grim game’ weighted by melancholic contemplation. Extending from the appreciation of the expressibility of things, it is of interest to consider Breer’s reflexive treatment of the cinematic apparatus, and the language of film in relation to the notion of translation. Benjamin (1996e, p.260) writes that, ‘as regards meaning, the language of translation can – in fact, must – let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*.’

In ‘The Task of the Translator’ Benjamin (1996e, p.255) broaches the implications of a

recognisability linked to criticism, when he argues, that the task also ‘consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history.’ While, Breer’s (Coté, 1962, p.18) experimental and structural exploration of the language of film is framed as a ‘space image’, it is an image space, which grapples with the interest taken in the object of cinema and particularly of animation-film. It can be argued that it presents an attempt to penetrate the condition of the technique and genre’s Disneyfication, by exhibiting the actuality of apparatus. In this manner the creatures that populate the image of *Recreation*, are not brought to life, as such, despite being animated, but are humorously revealed as mechanical devices. *Recreation* presents not the spectacle of the ‘illusion of life’, but through its kinetic optics points toward the

phantasmagorias at play within commodity culture and commercial animation.



Figure 54. Breer, *Recreation*, (3 stills).



The treatment in *Recreation* of ‘animated’ creatures is also exemplified by reflexive moments of *live-action*, in which the uncannily erratic pecking of mechanised birds, or the scurrying dart across the screen of a rolling tin mouse are juxtaposed to the rapid profusion of (single-frame) shots. Included in this profusion of quick-fire shots, it may be noted, that the living become immobilized, uneasily arrested in time, and take on a sense of photographic mortification, or suspended animation as the single-frame is held and stretches across the filmstrip to become discernable, as in the frozen cameo of Breer’s studio cat plonked awkwardly on the rostrum camera stand. The much-loved, often ferociously cruel, and frenziedly violent tradition in character animation of the cat and mouse or bird chase, which is repeatedly brought to and back from the verge of mortality, becomes deconstructed within *Recreation*’s allegorical structure and kinetic optic.

The conflicted emblematic liveliness of such encounters of the bird, cat and mouse are not recreated but thwarted, torn apart and left by Breer as frames scattered to the ‘manifold regions of meaning’. (Benjamin, 1998, p.217) Even so, this mischievous act and dis-integration of certain conventions of meaning within animation at play in *Recreation* become constructive when understood allegorically. The detail of the fleeting image-objects within the allegorical gaze is conceivably without any great importance, yet Benjamin (p.200) argues, that having been elevated it invariably points to something else as it becomes incorporated into a language ‘heavy with material display’. The allegorical mode has also been associated with the dismantling and notionally destructive processes of criticism, in terms of the ruination and fragmentation of a work’s ‘false unity’, disclosing the underlying content and the form’s structure and genre, and this likewise becomes entwined with the notion of its apparent construction. (pp.33, 178) One might consider, for instance, the unabashed banality of the inclusion of the packaging of a popular mechanical windup toy bird (Figure 59), and its status at once as a found-object and kitsch figurative element within the aesthetic concerns of its cinematic collage, yet whose contents as a mechanical, kinetic object, becomes emblematic of film itself, and finally part of the critique of the predominant mode of animation, whose optic, reframed as it is by kineticism, offers the striking final figure of *Recreation*.

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Discussing the geometric *Form Phases* films, Breer’s (Cummings, 1973, p.7) droll description of it being ‘like Mickey Mouse but without personalities’ suggests this critical preoccupation with animation is extensively rooted. Breer’s statement, infers a rejection of Disney’s famous development of animation toward the illusion of life. Such statements, along with aesthetic inferences in Breer’s films to Cohl in terms of the metamorphosis of the line-drawing e.g. *Fantasmagorie*, 1908 (Figure 78) and the audacious, burlesqued permutations between live-action, the photographic and hand-drawn animation in e.g. *Les Métamorphoses Comiques*, 1912, (Figure 79) as well as, direct iterations of Messmer’s Felix the Cat (Figure 86, 90) in Breer’s later films attest to an intense interest in the cunning strategies of a much earlier era of animation. During a period in which the Disney studio system not only comes to dominate the form, but also claims to have eclipsed its antecedents, the recovery of this lineage in the art of Breer’s films is part of a refusal of the commercial studio system’s expurgation of the exploratory, unchecked and at times anarchic spirit notable in early animation.

This contention is exemplified by Disney’s (Thomas & Johnston, 1981, p.29) statement, ‘At first the cartoon medium was just novelty, but it never really began to hit until we had more than tricks... until we developed personalities.’ The ‘conventional verisimilitude’ of Disney’s studio

system becomes established, North (2009, pp.112, 129) argues, with the consistency and theatricality of personality and plot, in contrast to earlier modes of characterization that largely arise as composites of visual gags, such as, the continually metamorphosing figure and scenery of Cohl's *Fantasmogorie*.

North further explores how the established naturalism of Disney is tied to the suppression of earlier cartoons whose elaboration in a series of tricks, went further, and delved, for instance, into aspects of mechanization within modern life. He points to the way early animations touch on the often-unwieldy modern experience of labour-saving devices and standardization, which is at times allied to the often resourceful aesthetics of cartoons (e.g. minimized form, simple rhythmic repetition to sophisticated off-set cycles indicating the familiar actions of walking, or machinery in motion, traveling backgrounds etc.). Complex moments of amusement have often been generated precisely out of the cartoons' economy of style whimsically exposing the mechanics of animation itself as it increasingly breaks down or becomes exuberantly erratic. These well-established practical devices can accumulate, North (2009, p.130) argues describing the architecture of an animated gag, 'to such a point that it triggers a phase change and becomes creative'. North regards the implications of Disney's disavowal of the animated burlesque, caricature, and slapstick comedy exhibited by such tricks, aberrations and inconsistencies, as integral to his particular development of the animation studio system, which furthermore largely precludes the opening afforded by ingenious slips, and inventiveness, so cherished by the artist-animator.

Through the repetition of limited movements which are made particularly evident by the elegant simplicity of pre-cinematic devices, Leslie (2013, p.74) discusses how the technical underpinnings become animated, while conversely the movement of its image accrues a sense of 'locked in-ness'. It is often as part of a mischievous acknowledgement of these apparent constrictions of movement that animated creatures, compelled by comic ingenuity, break out of the 'stasis' of repetitive cycles. These early self-reflexive antics, which reveal aspects of the mechanics of animated film do not diminish, but rather become an integral part of the pleasure taken in scrutinizing the ruses and dexterity of moments of cinematic magic. Such sequences often contain the mode of 'direct address', that accords with, for instance, Felix the Cat's acknowledgment, gesticulations and entreaties toward the viewer. This is a part of its dialectic 'instantiating' (Brown, 2012, p.16) both a shared immediacy to the situation through humour, with the audience invited in on the joke, as well as, a broader reflection upon its processes.

I would argue that this impetus of early animation also plays a considerable part in Breer's treatment of his abstract animation in *Form Phases IV*. Although less regarded within the field of

art, such references throughout Breer's work could be considered as significant as the lineage of Richter's abstract aesthetic logic of counterpoint rhythms and tensions in greater harmony. The aesthetic mode in early animations of condensation and abbreviation, as well as the slips into new phases are undoubtedly part of the pleasure of *Form Phases IV*, which is embedded in an appreciation of the set-up of its parameters and patterns, its subtle modifications, phase changes and pronounced incongruities. Breer's next work, *Recreation*, equally returns to the spirit of early animation and the problematic of the humorous reveal of its own workings. These moments of innovation created out of comic tension have long been deemed limited to novelty, by serious-minded proponents of cartoon animation. But, the kinetic, pre-pop aspects of Breer's work also had to contend with its potential dismissal as 'novelty art' promulgated by e.g. Greenbergian art critics, and typically levelled at works which operated outside his concept of established mediums, with its hierarchy of visual forms and the historical lineage of a certain mode of Modernism. Nevertheless, with its rapid succession of pictures and objects from apparently kitsch toys to various tools associated with image construction (Figure 45-7, 53, 55, 57), *Recreation's* filmic collage is connected to the impetus in art of breaching traditional disciplinary boundaries even as it raises the problematic of animation-film, a predominantly applied and craft-based art-form, in terms of its status as contemporary Art.

Recreation & The Allegorical Intentions of the Neo-avant-garde

Recreation presents by its rapid succession, a recursive sense of image processing, associated with its approach to the single-frame. The film initially conveys a sense of haphazardly unsystematic references, which draw the viewer into its allegorical intention, a mode that Benjamin (1998, p.232) has described as falling from 'emblem to emblem down into the dizziness of its bottomless depths'. The whimsically tethered games of its neo-avant-garde recreations are touched by a certain melancholy rooted in the sense, which A. Benjamin (2002, p.116) describes as previously noted, of 'the necessary impossibility of the Absolute's actualization'.

Some articles in the film, for instance, are akin to 'personal' souvenir-like effects, such as, loose doodles of cats, mechanical wind-up toys, letter-headed paper, hand-scrawled notes, and a musical score. One can likewise decipher objects that index the medium of animation-film and the commodity fetish of mass-produced objects. The range of ephemera includes film production gear, such as, spools and negative-film packaging, empty work gloves, jumbled audiotape and electrical chords. A pre-pop concern with communications media is also indicated, for instance, by references to the machinery of image reproduction, which includes magazine clippings and newsprint, diagrammatic plans, a half-tone photographic portrait clipped from the papers, and

various typographic design elements, such as, commercially produced transfer patterns of print-dots, shaded areas, and hatching. As the film's accelerated trajectory momentarily breaks down into these discontinuous details, *Recreation* would seem to be a repudiation of the once elevated universal reach of, say, formalist modernism and romantic abstract expressionism by its highly mediated treatment of largely commonplace objects. However, beyond the initially apparent 'formlessness', of such works, Breer (Coté, 1962, p.19) reasserts the 'formal' implications of the 'aesthetic relationships which have in fact been put in to the materials' and which along with the machinic force of its rapidity and irreverent jumps urges one to 'take the thing in as an actuality'.

Recreation's exploratory basis in the mechanisms of the film apparatus, with allusions to old and new technology and techniques is contradicted to an extent by the overtly handmade and constructed quality of the image. It reflexively raises the subject of craft-based means and filmic innovation, which moreover becomes figured by the inventive contraption of the cobbler (Figure 48). Yet, the film conversely imparts a sense of the immanent collapse of craft (made later explicit by Minimalism), in relation to the mechanized, reproducible image (Figure 55). *Recreation* can be considered as an artwork made in the face of the accruing detritus of the communications industries, with a refusal of film's delimitation as an instrument of (conventional) communications, as such, suggested by the filmstill below of scattered nails etc. on an advertising page of office or large-scale machinery, along with a clipping of devices for filing, methods of organization and duplication.



Figure 55. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

Recreation's cinematic image does not directly, or conventionally present a representational *worldspace* (Steinberg, 2002, pp.27-8, 34) which points toward the visual experience of a 'prior optical event'. It would seem, rather, to present the 'operational processes', an associative means, and the objects of its own creation. *Recreation's* questions are partly rooted in the principles of modernist self-definition, with an approach to form that has arisen out of the self-criticism of the

limits of the medium. This is suggested by *Recreation's* focus upon its *medium-specific* single-frame structure, which is, however, contradicted by its mode of cinematic *assemblage* that inherently opens beyond the strictures of Greenberg's formalist modernism.

Recreation presents at its core questions about the limits of the work, and asks where the art of time-based collage resides. Is the work to be found within the frame, or in the linear series of frames, neither of which are wholly available to the viewer (due to technical aspects of the apparatus, such as, the frame-rate of projection etc.)? Does it reside in the synthesis of the cinematic image whose perception, and reception changes over time as part of work's *afterlife*? Or, does *Recreation* suggest a document of preparatory materials and activity for an image that is alluded to and but which exists beyond its frame, as part of an assertion and fundamental critique of the instability of its own status?

With the barrage of 'literal' images and objects along with the contradictions encompassed by its projection screen, *Recreation*, comes to resonate with Steinberg's (2002, pp.27-8) notion developed in response to the perceived new orientation in art, associated with the horizontal sense of the image's *flatbed picture-plane* or 'work-surface picture plane' in works of the 1950s. This is exemplified by Rauschenberg 'as the foundation of an artistic language that would deal with a different order of experience' which indicates the new pervasiveness of spectacular societies' cultural and commercial mediation of the image of reality itself. For O'Doherty (1973, p.225) likewise, the mechanisms operating within such images begin to 'look more real everyday, reality less so.' This perspective resonates over the representational (illusionistic) metaphor of, say, a window onto reality, commonly utilized by film and painting. It expresses a sense of the contaminations of art and culture by urban environs, of which, as Steinberg (p.28) argues, the 'operational processes' of the *flatbed picture-plane*, is typified by, 'tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards – any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed – whether coherently or in confusion.'

Breer would seem to have been circumspectly drawn from the trajectory of an aesthetic logic within non-objective abstraction to a construct of cinematic *assemblage* that allows for potential unpredictability by, in effect, reimagining the technical parameters of film's form. Breer cinematically mediates the horizontality of this plane, and refracts the shifting problematics of painting, evincing its 'rhetorical presence', and the processes of the image, where one is also compelled to also take into account, as O'Doherty (1973, p.225) polemically suggests, a redoubling in which 'the picture plane is displayed not as literal fact – the main line of modernist thinking – but as supreme fiction. This both celebrates and destroys it, makes it disposable, but also renewable.' The new orientation expressed by such works is not dismissed as novelty in

Steinberg's interpretation, but understood as a repudiation of Greenberg's formalist theories, which, Harrison (2005, p.98) reiterates, disregards subject matter, the work's own expressive intentions, relations to culture, and iconography etc.

The aesthetic bid of collage as part of *Recreation's* 'space image' would seem to be built out of and pitted against film's inherent sequentiality. (Coté, 1962, p.18) The mechanical sequentiality of film is also reimagined, and harnessed by a subjectively 'automatic' action whose significance, however, is not coupled to the myth of direct spontaneity. It is from this perspective that I take Breer's (Macdonald, 1992, p.22) statement on his approach that he contradicts 'spontaneity by encapsulating these bursts of spontaneity in a structure of some kind.' Breer's approach is rightly differentiated by Sitney (2002, p.166) from the visionary scope of 'lyrical cinema'. With Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.51) likewise inferring, for instance, that Brakhage's film oeuvre pursues the 'romantic ideal, the cosmic view'. Sitney (1973, p.28) argues of Breer's work that while its development has a 'concrete pattern', it does not fit into the major classifications he has identified, such as, 'the trance film, the mythopoeic film or the structural film (even though [...] structural cinema has been influenced by his achievements).' By contrasting Breer to the category of 'Romantic filmmakers' and arguing that Breer's image-content is 'conventional' in terms of the distance set up between 'him and the subjects of his films' Sitney (p.30) determines, rather, that Breer 'is an extreme formalist'.

The ironized play of the 'automation' of film, suggested by the disparately consecutive frames, allows for both subjective (intuitive, spontaneous) and objective (serendipitous) interjections. *Recreation* is held between the self-reflexive instantiation of film's mechanized image, and as part of an experimental practice courting, for instance, the unintended, accidental and aleatory elements with its nod, for instance, to Zurich Dadaist Arp's chance collages. In *Recreation* this is expressed, for instance, by the new unforeseen image recreated out of disparate, consecutive film frames, whose ephemerality, but also conceptual framework conversely refuses the often naïve sense of material immediacy given to the objects of chance. Despite the postwar context, the trope may still have held Dadaist traces, which once indicated the problem of intention in relation to the absurd 'meaninglessness' of the age.¹⁰⁴

The utilization of objective serendipity, creates a sense of uncertainty about meaning or the consequence of the objects contained, as well as, of the unit of the frame subsumed within the stream of its cinematic image. However, the difficulty that arises out of *Recreation's* experimental

¹⁰⁴ (See discussion of audio-track in Appendix A. and p.137)

production becomes central to the film's question, because it presents a sense of being both bound by and extending beyond the frame and its intrinsically arbitrary delimitations. In relation to *Recreation's* treatment of film's seriality, and as an early instance of such considerations it is of interest to note, as North (2013, p.234) argues, that subsequently 'in much Pop, minimalism, and conceptual art, a good deal is staked on the notion that units other than words can be found and arranged in series that might display this sort of unlimited extension.'

Recreation allegorizes the destabilization of meaning that arises when initially faced with the form of the work, and which can be set more broadly, as Breer recounts, in relation to his initially youthful rebellion against his religious upbringing. Considering the underlying intention that would be driven toward the single-frame effect, Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.43), states, 'If you question everything, you'll question why you have to eliminate flicker. Flicker is disturbing, but it has an impact [...]. It's just another tool we've overlooked. I question all the time. It started out with my questioning the existence of God when I was a little kid.' This can be related back more fundamentally to the risks proposed by the Dadaist utilization of chance that would speculatively open a space for the possibility of the disruption of established orders.

Briefly turning to Benjamin's (1998, p.140) consideration of the allegory and the immersion of the melancholic subject 'on the road to the object – no: within the object itself' it would seem that the tools of construction, the recreation of artistic tropes, allusions to various mediums, an array of genres and everyday objects, and the flickering ideas associated with their materialization are in the active process of being assembled. Yet the somewhat randomly perceived objects placed on the *flatbed picture-plane*-like orientation of *Recreation's* screen are also at times caught as if 'lying around unused on the floor, as objects of contemplation'. (p.140) This imparts the tension of a picture's creation beyond the frame, but also of an image whose visibility or recognition is to a great extent elusive and deferred.

By exploring the expressive communication of the cinematic object, itself, *Recreation* arises out of rudimentary filmic processes and materializations of the image. The accumulation of fragments and confounding wealth of referents in *Recreation* present a sense of the postwar, postmodern allegorical condition, and in the search for meaning, lays the 'petrified unrest' of its landscapes open to a potentially melancholic profusion of interpretations. (Benjamin, 2003a, p.169)

Benjamin's (1998, p.178) account is worth considering with regards to aspects of the allegorical perception within critical art practices after high modernism, 'that which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice [...] to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and, in

unremitting expectation of a miracle to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification. [...] The legacy of antiquity constitutes, item for item, the elements from which the new whole is mixed. Or rather: is constructed. For the perfect vision of this new phenomenon was the ruin.' Benjamin, however, later touches on the complex way in which, as Caygill (2010, pp.251, 253) summarizes, the albeit repressed, negative or destructive force of 'allegorical modernism' is in a sense diminished before the 'condition of petrified unrest' exemplified by the 'stabilized instability of the capitalist economy in which values are perpetually being assigned and devalued', as part of the 'allegorical culture of high capitalism'. Even so, it has been explored as part of modernist and critical postmodern disputes, as Day (1999, p.105) outlines, which presents, for example, an 'explicit challenge to formalist aesthetics'.

Steinberg (2002, p.32) points toward the particular materialization of the included image-objects within this mode of (Rauschenbergian) collage and argues, 'the picture's flatness was to be no more of a problem than the flatness of a disordered desk [...] you can pin or project any image because it will not work as a glimpse of a world, but as a scrap of printed material.' Steinberg (p.28) writes of this shift, which he associates with the *flatbed picture-plane*, 'it is not the actual placement of the image that counts. [...] What I have in mind is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation, and I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.' In this sense the conceptual address of the image made by *Recreation*, can be grasped in (Benjaminian) allegorical terms, not as part of naturalization of categorial divisions, and (formalist) modernism's policing of boundaries, but rather, its recreation or reconceptualised opening of film is sought by the tearing apart of its object. Film becomes subject not to the enlivenment of animation or the mimicry of live-action reproduction, but to the critical processes of mortification.

This aspect of *Recreation's* approach notwithstanding the sheer verve of its collection also suggests a mode of criticism allied to the tenacious persistence of the melancholic, described by Benjamin (1998, p.157) more specifically in terms of the descending levels of intention that is significantly 'born out of a loyalty to the world of things.' Benjamin's notion of criticism as the 'mortification of works of art' is tied to ascertaining the knowledge, which resides within its 'constructed ruins'. Benjamin (1996c, p.151) writes, in the 'Concept of Criticism' that the early Romantic sense that 'the subject of reflection is, at bottom, the artistic entity itself, and experiment consists not in any reflecting on an entity but in the unfolding of reflection' becomes for Benjamin part of an artworks fundamental criticizability, part of the (ironic) contradictions of a work and the tensions within which its 'way of meaning' is held. (Friedlander, 2012, p.19) (Benjamin, 1996e, p.260)

This is contrasted to the later Romantic idealizations in terms, as Benjamin (2008c, p.183) describes, of the enhanced ‘awakening of consciousness in living works’. The ‘beautiful semblance’ is likewise described by Benjamin (1996a, p.340) as ‘the false, errant totality – the absolute totality’, which is shattered into a thing of shards. *Recreation* becomes recognizable in this light, as part of a critical unfolding of the semblance of ‘creatureal life’ - claimed at the heights of romantic expressionist art, or assumed to a degree, more literally with the magic of animation film. Yet, the task which constitutes *Recreation*, and its *afterlife* does not become at its core about legitimization, but as Benjamin (1994, pp.224, 225) (1998, pp.181-2) suggests, to ‘gather the creatureal life into the idea’. Here the idea of art is transformed through its critical optic and directed at animation-film. Or conversely, with *Recreation*’s heightened attention to the ‘conventions of expression’ in perception and form within art and animation-film, the film’s objects become refigured by its allegorical poetics anticipating a mode of recognition that is not allied to the ‘conventional expression’ of magic associated with mainstream animation or cinema, but to the provocations of art. (Benjamin, 1998, p.175)

The Critical Hand of the Allegorist



Figure 56. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

Breer’s transient conceptual strategies, self-reflexivity and anti-illusionism, along with the aesthetic modes of distancing which displace the centrality of the (artistic) subject and subjective expression (allied to bourgeois ‘autonomous’ individualism), however, do not necessarily make Breer an ‘extreme formalist’ (Sitney, 1973, p.30). This is typically used as a criticism of supposed ahistoricism, and withdrawal from the world, in which image-content becomes overridden by the content of form. Following Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.22) and the work’s broader references, it can be surmised that the direct, spontaneous action of the artist is not entirely negated in

Recreation, but held in a contradictory dynamic with the machinic structure of the films' brazen single-frame aesthetics. Furthermore, the assembled image-content of *Recreation* reflects an awareness of art's shifting debates associated with the post-war revival of modernism's 'absolute' abstraction, a sense of the opening but also conventionalization of abstract expressionism, as well as, avant-garde (conceptual) anti-aestheticism with wide-ranging implications for artistic deskilling.

The approach of *Recreation* resonates with the neo-avant-garde resistance to high modernism's simultaneous reductions and the overextension of the principles of form. Rather, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) argues, 'any art discipline, or any kind of expressive disciplines are arbitrary. They are useful at the time [...] but, they're perfectly open to complete violation. I don't think there is any sacrosanct— I don't believe, in other words, the picture plane is... It's an interesting concept. It's valid if it's done right. The truth is somewhere in how it's done, not in itself as some moral edict, you know. What the hell is wrong with a hole in the wall?'

In this spirit, Breer's collage aesthetic should be considered as part of a broader self-reflexive approach, whose subversion of conventions as part of its constant framing of animation-as-art takes on the industry's conventionalization of animation-film, and which is belied by its 'deceptively causal mixtures of the anecdotal and the absolute' (Hoberman, 1980, p.68). Breer's approach heeds Adorno's (1997, p.18) warning against works confined to 'a new form of immediacy, without any memory or trace of what it developed out of, and therefore gutted and anonymous' along with debates on the sensual that are poised restrictively between the principles of form and the 'failure of craft'. Breer's praxis as explored here, is considered part of a moment prior to the reactionary 'anything goes' populism of later postmodernism and art-market *postconceptualism*. It does not relinquish the significance of materials, nor the practice-based development of techniques, and so had to contend with the protracted art-institutional marginalization of animation-film, which remained largely associated with craft-based arts and applied mass-production techniques. It thus fundamentally differed in perspective from the appropriation of an established set of visual languages in which the historicity of form becomes rendered within an institutionalized equivalence, regularly allied to the assumption that with this ostensible freedom, the cultural order is likewise already effectively dismantled, or decentred.

More broadly this perspective should be considered as part of the historical consciousness of the neo-avant-garde, which to an extent confronts the postwar scrapheap of ideological forms. On one level, the diversity in *Recreation* presents a sense of the modern 1950s experience increasingly inundated by acceleration, consumerism, and mediatisation. On another level, the single-frame aesthetics of Breer's practice inventively bridges distinctive discourses (abstract painting and the

moving-image, cinematic collage, (anti-)kinetic sculpture, cartoon and animation-film). The approach is allied to a crucially non-hierarchical or elitist sensibility, encapsulated by Breer's (Beauvais, 2006, p.169) motto 'Everything goes – not anything!'. In his discussion of the inclusion of references to early animation, such as, Messmer's Felix the Cat, Breer (Trainor, 1979, p.18) states, 'My purpose is not to tickle a few film buffs looking at the thing so much as, I guess, to be all-inclusive. When I make these collage films I have a theory that everything goes, not anything, but everything. And so I've got to include cartooning.'

Countering the charge, by Debord, Bürger etc., of collusion by the neo-avant-garde in the reification of the *artwork* and commodification of the art object, Foster et al. (2004, p.472) asserts that 'articulating the profound ambiguities of cultural production by inhabiting its contradictions is different from mere complicitous affirmation.' Equally, Huyssen (1986, pp.141-42) in 'The Cultural Politics of Pop' discusses the emergent critical potential of postmodernism, and how the pre-pop moment and early pop cultural inclusions within art were not necessarily considered affirmative of a conspicuous consumer culture. Broader cultural references, contained within *Recreation's* cinematic assemblage, holds out the possibility of renewing art by touching on social criticism, as well as, the 'liberation' of art from previous hierarchies and constraints of genre, themes and traditional mediums.



Figure 57. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

Recreation's image-content probes the conventions of form and mark-making by its wide-ranging inclusion of e.g. representational cartoon sketches, the 'expressive' gesture, *direct animation* scratch-on-film sequences, awryly placed reproductions of painted figurative scenes, technical diagrams, graphic and printed matter, print dots and moiré meshes, a musical score sheet (Figure 60) along with the instancing of animal figures throughout the film, from the delicate organically patterned peacock-like figure of the Miro-esque paper-cut (Figure 57) to the folded paper arts of the familiar origami crane (Figure 56). The neo-avant-garde concern with mark-making is

encapsulated, for example, in Figure 58 of an X created out of a painterly, gestural black line, intersected by a torn, ephemeral slip of handwritten notepaper which also presents a non-illusionistic materialization – the object X marks the spot. At the same time, the potential expressivity of the gesture is bound by the calligraphic and traversed with a conceptual valence, which is here reminiscent of Rauschenberg’s non-expressionistic drips (see Figure 71 and discussion of *Rebus*, 1955, Chapter 5).

The uncanny presence of the splayed empty glove opposite the X image-object, conjures the contradictory unstable prominence, and absence of the animator-creator’s hand. *Recreation* would seem to be refracting the questions within art of subjective authority and artistic intentionality in a potentially accessible manner by transposing popular themes from animation. *Recreation* signals the trope of the animator-as-creator, which inaugurates some of the earliest animations, such as Cohl’s *Fantasmagorie*, 1908 (Figure 78). The hand of the animator commences *Fantasmagorie* and is filmed creating a simple line-drawn figure of a magic-clown, which is then spurred into action as an acrobatic shape-shifting prankster. Evocative of stream-of-consciousness, the beguiling character undergoes a series of metamorphosing gags and trials, but after defenestration appears to lie lifeless on the ground. The animator’s hands reappear at this point to resuscitate the overextended and broken figure who is jolted back into a happy ending, or the possibility of other hapless adventures, and in direct-address to the audience exits waving a merry farewell.



Figure 58. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

Yet, *Recreation* also signals the intrusion of the less conspicuous, often-indistinct glimpses within animation of the typically interruptive, and inadvertent blur captured of the animator’s hand in the shot (Figure 59). Along with Breer’s discontinuous treatment in animation-film of the single-frame, Breer’s inclusion of the figure of the hand flaunts a wholly consistent disregard for the dominant conventions and guiding principles espoused by later commercial animation. Breer’s *Recreation* is an active ‘decreation’ directed not loosely at the illusionary, but takes aim at the

particular enchantment of animated-worlds, which had become dogma. Breer (Trainor, 1979, pp.18-19) frankly discusses having ‘problems dealing with studio animation’, and despite being periodically low on funds maintained his distance from commercial animation. In this vein, the vacant work-glove or fleeting visibility of the hand, moreover, speaks to the diminished scope for individual creativity within the established field of animation, as the auteurist imagery of the animation-creator’s hand becomes fundamentally counter to the highly conventionalized studio system pioneered by figures, such as, Disney.



Figure 59. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

The motif of the hand in *Recreation* is also set in relation to the problematic of art, whose accidental visibility is part of a reflection upon the experimental processes of its own making. This becomes entwined with the avant-garde’s notional salute to the element of chance, which is here seared with the question of artistic expression and intention. The disused work gloves may also conceivably reflect Breer’s concern with the increasingly subsidiary status of handcraft within conceptualism. To this extent the form of *Recreation* is an affirmation of the Dadaist medium of collage with its incorporation of non-art objects, modes of image making, and (non-traditional) technologies.

The in/discernible unit of the single-frame dispersing into a stream creates what Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) calls, a cinematic ‘space image’. It underpins the aesthetic logic of *Recreation*, a collage film relentlessly pursued ‘with the gloves off’. The difficulty and ostensible whim of such gestures featured, implies a surrealist game of automatism at play against the automation and mechanical apparatus of film. The perceptual challenges for the viewer presented by the rapidity of the single-frame imagery foreground a sense of the autonomy of the image created, beyond the integrity of either the artist or machine. This manner of rapid pursuit is in contrast to the deceleration in shots of the pensive inactivity, such as, of the artist’s clenched upturned fists (Figure 56), that are, even so, quietly expectant, not necessarily empty. At once shackled by the

frame, held and motionless, it is a conflicted melancholic moment that is, nevertheless, also a potentially contemplative respite, a pause within the torrent of the image. While such sequences evoke a distanciated sense of artistic self-expression, it is also a wily reflection on artistic labour and upon its own status as art.



Figure 60. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

To situate the ostensibly spur-of-the-moment critiques raised by *Recreation* beyond the discipline of animation, one might also suggest it has a degree of correspondence with the anti-aesthetic critiques that 1960s *photoconceptualism* has advanced through its particular engagement with the problematic of photography-as-art in, for instance, Baldessari's *Wrong*, 1966-68. The work contains a professionally painted sign of the caption WRONG under the picture (photo-emulsion on canvas) of a person in a banal suburban landscape in which a palm tree is classically misaligned becoming part of the subject, as if, bolting straight out of the figure's head. The *photo-painting* interrogates the categories, conventions, and the conceptual problematic of artistic and non-artistic image production in relation to the changing significance of the mastery and role of aesthetic ideology and judgment within Art and Photography. Such critical reflections associated with the intentional use of e.g. the snap-shot's lo-fi intimacy, and the long-held allure of the mistake, such as, photographic and printmaking misprints, and cinematographic imperfections and the misapplication (e.g. of the animation-film form itself), can be reread beyond their expressive and subjective appropriation. Roberts (2002, p.2), for instance, revisits such effects within the lineage of the avant-garde's engagement with the documentary style.

The interruptive force and impulsive mode of critique in *Recreation*, can also be extended, for instance, to the beauty espoused, as Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.7) notes, by the 'kind of Kodak award-winning amateur studies' of his father's 'really corny home movies'. Breer reminisces that his 'engineer-inventor-movie-making old man' set about doing 'all the things that you were supposed to do in the manual'. Breer (1973a, p.69) continues that confronted with 'the spectre of

my mother, flower in hand, coming forward into the darkened room with her legs missing and other similar truncated apparitions and my father's various unsuccessful attempts to deal with this "edge" problem led me to speculations about the nature of art versus reality.' The aesthetic implication of such disjunctions becomes evident in the presented-ness of *Recreation's* objects, which while without an inclination toward the transcendent, undoubtedly touches on what Groys (2010, p.6) in 'The Weak Universalism' has discussed as part of the 'radical reduction of the artistic tradition' which counters 'mass contemplation of strong signs with high visibility' by pursuing the 'low visibility of everyday life.'



Figure 61. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

While Breer's work is celebrated for presenting the 'locus of tension between the still and moving image' (Sitney, 2002, p.272) and this is considered largely as part of a probe into 'the nature of human perception' (Macdonald, 1992, p.7), it must also be understood as a critical interrogation of its object, which takes on the categories, and conventions of art, including photography and, more unusually for this period, of animation-film in order to dismantle narrative order, attack and rearrange the tacit hierarchies of meaning and value. These predominantly overlooked *para-conceptual* pre-pop aspects in *Recreation's* aesthetic play with the multivalent expressive intentions of its object, and its critical contemporary quality still resonates today. This can be differentiated from more recent works that primarily employ such strategies stylistically. However, regarding the 'deflationary content' that such strategies once presented, Roberts' (2002, p.12) warns that the now 'limited naturalism' of such aesthetics has become 'institutionally familiar' and is invariably, '*constituted, framed, and mediated* by its own critical assimilation'.

The playful pursuit of *Recreation's* assemblage, its immersion and self-reflexive digressions amongst the fragmentary, accumulative, potentially endless array of shots evoke a melancholic relation to the cinematic-object. The connotations of the film's title as a form of recreation, or its experimentation in terms of dada-esque humor and amusements could likewise be drawn into a

more complex dynamic with Benjamin's notion of an allegorical poetics. Turning to Benjamin's (1998, p.184) notion of the allegorical mode, he writes of how in the allegorist's 'hands the object becomes something different', and is rarely securely possessed as a fixed schema or image. Such an approach is contrasted to what Benjamin (1998, p.186) characterizes as the 'symbolic totality venerated by humanism'. In this vein one might return to the romantic subjectivism of expressionistic films that would seem to revere the presence and intuition of the artist in the act of creation. With *Recreation*, however, it is, 'as something incomplete and imperfect that objects stare out from the allegorical structure'. (p.186)

While this veneration is rarely sustained within the entertainments of film, it is implicitly construed by Brakhage's (2001a, p.211) abstract-expressionistic films, which are correlated with artistic inspiration, *musical ideas*, etc. and generated with 'the electric synapses of thought to achieve overall cathexis paradigms separate but "at one" with the inner lights, The Light at source, of being human'. Such a framework ostensibly cultivates a dialectic of the (artist's) subjectivity with the expressive *timelessness* of art. The ambition of abstract expressionism, O'Doherty (1973, p.120) suggests, is to convince the viewer of the extraordinary, and near *impossibility* of its feat, which furthermore imparts the sense of 'an apparition without a history'. Brakhage (2001b, p.12) famously imagines in *Metaphors on Vision* a cinema of the 'untutored eye' prior to the fallen conception of language,

unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. [...] Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations of color. Imagine a world before the 'beginning was the word.'

Primarily framing the process as visual music, and watched in uncontested silence, Brakhage (pp.12-13) continues with an implicit challenge to the applicability of a linguistically oriented film theory for nonverbal, experimental or visionary cinema as 'demanding the development of the optical mind, and dependent upon perception in the original and deepest sense of the word', concluding that 'in these times the development of visual understanding is almost universally forsaken'. Brakhage's (2001a, p.209) keen use of 'direct' handheld camerawork, subjective mode of editing, and other distortion techniques of cinematic reproduction become channelled into abstract expressionist cine-paintings of the 1980s whose present-tense, immediacy becomes part of an 'aesthetic aspiration', a materialized immanence that, he asserts following W.C. Williams, 'would have no ideas but in things'.

In this sense Brakhage's work suggests the possibility of a bodily image wholly permeated by technology in its poetics of the filmic apparatus, which is affectively at odds with the capitalist

worldview of means-ends rationality. However, the potentially critical beauty of Brakhage's filmic poetics, its potential for *profane illumination*¹⁰⁵ in the strength of its attack upon the limits of cinematic discourse becomes undercut, by the import assigned to Brakhage's (swiftly depoliticized) metaphor on vision within which he embeds his work. Despite its intensive reframing of the technological, and of painting within a time-based medium, such a discourse risks a kind of painterly positivism when it avoids critical-historical reflection on how the 'destruction and constitution of the *concept* of painting' is at play within the moving-image. (This notion arises in Osborne's (2009a, p.96) consideration of *postconceptual* painting.)

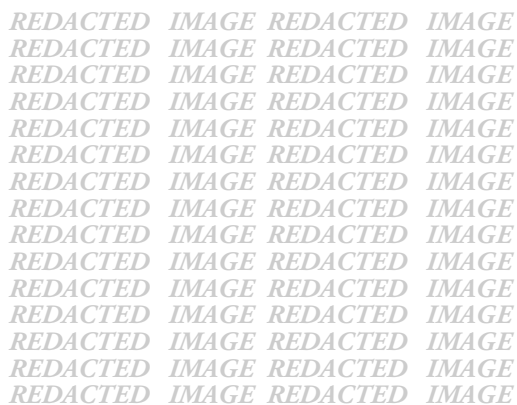


Figure 62. Raushenberg, *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, (4.1mx67.1m, paint on 20 sheets of paper with ends rolled into scrolls, ca. 1960).

While Breer's work presents, at one level, the continued relevance of craft and the problematic of aesthetics as part of the work of undoing the marginalized status of animation-film, and as part of its concern with its possible transdisciplinary recognizability, it nevertheless registers, at

another level, the neo-avant-garde sense of the 'collapse' of craft. Yet, the conditions within which Breer's work is produced does not issue from the more stringent conceptual sensibility of *aesthetic indifference* associated with the Duchampian readymade. It is against this backdrop that the blithe *para-conceptual* gesture of the tin-toy's trail of black-ink footprints in the ending sequence of *Recreation* (Figure 63) may be understood as presenting a critique of the status of artistic 'creation' that would secure expressionistic mark-making to self-expression. This parallels Rauschenberg's neo-avant-garde and here the temporal indexical treatment of paint in contrast to the dominance of abstract expressionism during this period (Chapter 5). While it is unlikely that Breer would have been familiar with Rauschenberg's *Automobile Tire Print*, 1953, which largely remained private until the 1970s, I would argue, that Breer's work presents a similar concern with mark-making and the mechanics of art that is touched on extensively throughout his work. The (*para-conceptual*) underpinning of the work is allied to the single-frame, destabilized by the technological experience, and becomes elusive in the practice of its recreation. The rapid profusion of seemingly disconnected things captured within its photographic frame becomes a disorderly, although often apt, assemblage of objects in which aspects of the medium are reflexively signaled in a manner that is humorously satirized.

¹⁰⁵ Benjamin (1999b, p.216) writes, 'we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable and the impenetrable as everyday.'



Figure 63. Breer, *Recreation*, (2 stills).

The kinetic object meanders, rummaging, and intermittently rhythmically pecks amongst rivets, eyelets, and stationary split pins in a provocative relation between art, kitsch, and the commonplace. The associative leap of such sequences, furthermore, suggests a concern with the mechanics and photographic index of film, and internal workings of Breer's own filmic processes. It is from the difficult discernibility of the rapid flux and flow of non-narrative, non-continuous motion which the film's single-frame collage aesthetic presents, that the mechanical recreation and live-action simulation of life in such sequences offer a moment of respite. Yet, its ironic doubling gives a deeply equivocal sense of the mechanics of 'real' time, as the toy's familiar, yet strangely comical dawdling, jerkily and automatically leaves a delicate indexical trace of footprints. Disjointedly, it becomes reminiscent of the sprocket holes lining a filmstrip, and of the camera's intermittent mechanism whose claw pulls down the frame by its sprocket holes. A sequential image of time is here presented, along with the inherent linearity of film. By conspicuous contrast, the density of *Recreation's* cinematic collage immerses the viewer into a perception of things and the experience of time becomes tethered qualitatively to fragmentary glimpses that tremble with the unpredictability of their suddenness. With the concomitant force of the rapid accumulation of the cinematic image, such sights are always on the cusp of obscurity at risk of becoming lost to memory. Yet, it is the friction of such disparities, which irreverently emphasize Breer's anti-kinetic and simultaneously kinetic approach to film, (and contains the nascent, satirical sensibility of Breer's later imperceptibly roaming kinetic sculptures.)

CHAPTER 5

On Materialization, Aesthetic logic & Spatio-temporalization of the Filmic Image:

Setting Breer's process and film Eyewash¹⁰⁶, 1959

in relation to the Neo-avant-garde, Rauschenberg's Rebus, 1955

Film theorist and film-maker Burch (1959, p.57), observed that Breer's work appreciably inherited the collage strategies of Schwitters, for whom Breer (Obrist, 2001) has likewise asserted a 'heartfelt sympathy', as is evident in his first cinematic assemblage, *Recreation*, 1956. Nevertheless, it can to an extent be differentiated from Schwitters' approach, which strove formally for harmonic 'order', as Elderfield (1985, p.82) suggests, and which has been applauded by Greenberg (1986a, p.208) for the 'single-mindedness' of the way his works have 'striven for a strict internal aesthetic logic.'¹⁰⁷ To this extent, it is also worth excavating a connection to the neo-avant-garde, and particularly the collage-paintings of Raushenberg, such as, *Rebus*, 1955 (Figure 71) which exemplifies the significance of the refusal of an overall aesthetic order within his collage-painting, and emphasis upon heterogeneity, and 'random order'. In Breer's (Coté, 1962, pp.18-9) subsequent work, such as, *Eyewash*, 1959 there is an indication that he is also traversing these shifts in attitudes, as is evident in his concern with the 'anti-continuity' of his cinematic collages and the viscerally open energy with which he approaches (non)traditional materials and modes.



Figure 64. Breer, *Eyewash*, 1959, (6min, 16mm, blurred live-action and paint-on-film).

The sensitivity and skill evinced by Schwitters' (2002b, p.222) 'delicate machines,'¹⁰⁸ influentially presents the friction between 'life' and the semblance to art's autonomy, with an affirmative negation of traditional hierarchies within art's history.

This engagement with the scrambling of the orders of meaning and playful confrontation of perceptual regimes, culminate in the particularity of each work's cessation. The dynamic synthesis of its 'polarized' disparate elements constructed

¹⁰⁶ Included: *Treasures IV: American Avant-garde Film*, 1947-86, video anthology, National Film Preservation Foundation.

¹⁰⁷ See: (Taylor, 2004, p.109)

¹⁰⁸ (Elderfield, 1985, p.82)

out of reality's 'chaos' evokes the sense of having been seized from a pre-discursive continuum to create a new 'overall' order.¹⁰⁹ The sensibility within abstraction, which is often attributed to the *allover* works of abstract expressionism, affords Greenberg (1993, p.81) argues, a sense of *presence*, an absorbed contemplation of the work's 'at-onceness' even if the 'picture repeats its instantaneous unity like a mouth repeating a single word'.

Nevertheless, by not advocating an explicitly anti-aesthetic, anti-art avant-garde position laid out by e.g. Huelsenbeck (1951a), and with its orientation to expand the (traditional) medium of painting, Schwitters' work becomes restrictively relegated to a *negation* of a more radically robust continuum with life by its contemplative reflection on the reification of society. While such a bind also came to characterize neo-avant-garde works, its rejection of prominent positions held by the historical avant-garde must be briefly reconsidered.

Joseph (2007, p.8), for instance, focuses upon Rauschenberg's contribution to the 'Art of Assemblage Symposium', 1961, (Seitz et al., 1992b) and particularly his refusal of the supposedly negative avant-garde categories and approaches underpinned by, for instance, negation and shock. This relates to the more general mood of antipathy by younger American painters towards the increasingly doctrinaire dissemination and reception of modernist painting, (which became associated with aspects of Greenberg's legacy).¹¹⁰ In the Assemblage Symposium (Seitz et al., 1992b, p.127) this is played out in its debate on the 'zero' of form, the abstract absolute. The effects of this period and non-representational approaches¹¹¹ are framed not only as the primary exploration of form, but crucially as an immanent or internal process from which arises the very question of what art constitutes.



Figure 65. Breer, *Eyewash*, (screen-tone acetate and cutout).

Such approaches are differentiated by Foster (1994, p.19) from the legacy of more overtly conceptual modes that are understood as external or coming 'from without', such as in the Duchampian (anti-art) gesture. However, the questions of such

¹⁰⁹ See: Tomkins (1980, p.87), Joseph (2007, p.355).

¹¹⁰ See: (Taylor, 2004, p.151)

¹¹¹ Regarding the 1920s monochrome paintings be it the iconic and potentially revolutionizing of art in Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915, or Rodchenko's monochrome triptych of pure primary colored canvases, 1921 of a paradoxical impasse, an endpoint whose question was directed back at art's limits.

engagements, Foster continues, have correspondence in their relation to art's autonomy and the use of everyday or industrial materials, as well as assumptions about the role, expressivity or aesthetic indifference of the artist working 'to reveal the conventional limits of art in a particular time and place'. Osborne (1992, p.186) likewise argues of the underlying sense of alienation associated with the dilemma of abstraction is that it cannot but 'represent',

The connection of this disavowal of illusion to the crisis of sensuousness in art is that, robbed of its character as illusion, sensuousness cannot but become conceptual. The meaning of an apparently purely sensuous art like abstract painting, for example, cannot be grasped without concepts: primarily, the concept of art as sensuous illusion, which it preserves in determinate negation.

Returning to this problematic recently, Osborne (2010a, p.11) speculates that 'postconceptual art is contemporary art' insofar as artworks immanently register that they are necessarily aesthetic i.e. this speaks to a historical awareness of various aspects of modernism, both 'pure' sensuous abstraction, and conceptual abstraction, and the implicit impossibility in the realm of art, of an absolute anti-aesthetic gesture. Osborne (2011b, p.116) summarizes this shift from the lineage of *medium-specific* modernism to the alternative modernism of Duchampian conceptualism in terms of the 'transformation of the ontology of the artwork, effected in the course of the last fifty years, from a craft-based ontology of mediums to a post-conceptual, transcategorical ontology of materializations'. Today, art becomes framed as a distributive unity of expanding material instantiations and means, but likewise it becomes no longer adequate to nominate something as art without a critical reflection upon its aesthetic implications, along with the textualization and expanded situation of art. In this way, the period of Breer's early film works which dynamically mediate aspects of modernist movements and formalist disputes, startlingly echoes aspects of the contemporary condition.



Figure 66. Breer, *Eyewash*, (2 stills).

Considering the ‘radical reduction of artistic tradition’ by the avant-gardes, Groys (2010, p.6) has more recently argued in ‘The Weak Universalism’ that this mode still predominates within contemporary art. Concurrent with a world of accelerated and perpetual change has been the dissolution of the unified position in classical art and the culture industry of the ‘mass contemplation of strong signs with high visibility’, and in response to this condition, the avant-garde pursue the ‘low visibility of everyday life’. In the ‘Art of Assemblage Symposium’, 1961, Rauschenberg (Seitz et al., 1992b, p.133) adamantly refuses a relation to the deep-seated nihilism, or the experience of potential oblivion, nothingness and disorder associated with wartime Dadaism.

In relation to the reproductions of classical art included in his collage-paintings Rauschenberg, it is often argued, considers the image’s representational quality not necessarily in a historically charged way, but rather is approached in an empirical manner, with a degree of *indifference* adopted, in which it becomes part of a potentially *neutral* ground.¹¹² This approach, is in part attributed by Hopps (1991), for instance, to his training at Black Mountain College with Albers, whose version of Bauhaus nonobjective modernism maintained an inclusive approach to the literal sensuality of materials and their combinations which stressed the inherent properties of, e.g. paper, wood, metal, along with their particular handling that had little to do with classical artistic skills, nor did it prioritize, or auratize paint, as such.



Figure 67. Breer, *Eyewash*, (feltpen, overpainted photograph, suggests the popular cinema-history legend of Lumières’ *Arrival of the Train*, 1896, 2 stills).

As Joseph (2007, p.107) argues, materials are encountered as facts, and paint in Rauschenberg’s framework becomes an industrial product, a color (not ensnared by associations), whose handling is, rather, akin to a Duchampian *readymade*. Rauschenberg (Seitz et al., 1992b, pp.138, 137) argues

¹¹² Besides Rauschenberg’s (Seitz et al., 1992b, p.138) contribution to the polemic of the ‘Assemblage Symposium’ see also Rauschenberg’s ‘open neutrality’ by O’Doherty (1973, p.193).

that ‘any material has its content and its independence from meaning’ and reflects on the routes to the non-representational ‘zero’, that ‘there must be room for an any *way* there. [...] It can be done as a direct act or contact with the moment.’ While Rauschenberg’s work has representational elements, it is typically not likened to Schwitters’ formation of a cohesive image within a cubist lineage. This is differentiated as, Krauss (2002, p.50) argues, by the way Rauschenberg’s image-objects, the representational elements and things incorporated within the image are transformed so as to ‘suspend their materiality between their own identity as objects and a transformation into sheer pictorial design or tone.’ Within Rauschenberg’s work these elements are not felt transformed but are rather *transferred*. This is most apparent with Rauschenberg’s inclusion of readily available black and white reproductions of classical images, such as, Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’ in the painting *Rebus*, 1956 (Figure 71), which becomes yet another ‘species of material’. Krauss (p.50) continues by arguing that the image-objects in Rauschenberg’s paintings operate, ‘by never transcending the material world, the image is unambiguously identified with that material world – arising within it rather than beyond it.’

Joseph (2007, p.124) likewise argues for a critical positivistic force for the neo-avant-garde and for Rauschenberg’s collages. To this end, Cage is often quoted in support of Rauschenberg’s optimism, setting the tone of neo-avant-garde art, as ‘an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent, once one gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of the way and let it act of its own accord.’ Rauschenberg’s ascendancy is located, at least in part in the exploration of collage as a ‘means to reproduce non-order’ (Tomkins, 1980, p.87) or, as in the title of one of his works, a ‘random order’.



Figure 68. Breer, *Eyewash*, (paint-on-film, felt-pen rainbow, card, movement of colored light, 2 stills).

By contrast, the luxury of seeing art’s history and materials in terms of an empirically *neutral* ground was not available in quite the same way for Breer (Levine, 1973, p.5), as the contested

valence of various mediums and genres of the representational, figurative, geometric abstraction, and abstract figuration is persistently navigated throughout Breer's work in terms of a concern with 'crossing over the threshold' of conventions, and in which the medium of 'painting' is complicated by the problematic and particularities of handling the moving-image itself.

The implicit appreciation of an overall field of cohesion within Breer's earlier works is to a degree integral to his unique exploration of the form of film as a spatial-image. This sense is linked not to a retrograde desire for aesthetic orderliness, but is a necessary part of the conceptual and structural framing of the experience of surprise and uncertainty that is associated with the apparent unpredictability of the film's course of events and the disjuncture of its juxtaposition of images, which is compounded by the utilization of tactics which afford 'pure chance'. Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) specifically elaborates the notion of film as 'space-image' that operates over time adding,

A painting can be 'taken in' immediately, that is, it is present in its total self all the time. My own approach to film is that of a painter – that is, I try to present the total image right away, and the images following are merely aspects of and equivalent to the first and final image. Thus the whole work is constantly presented from beginning to end and, though in constant transformation, is at all times its total self. Obviously, then, there is no denouement, no gradual revelation except for the constantly changing aspects of the statement, in the same manner in which a painting is subjectively modified during viewing.

The actively non-narrative, non-linear modes of radical equivalence are apparent in Breer's approach to film with its multivalent forms of imagery, including the photographic, the registration of hand-manipulation and of mark-making. These divergent approaches to materials and textures, at times literal (e.g. the arbitrary shuffling of image-cards), as well as, expressive or formal concern with 'random order' all have resonances with the discursive space in which, for instance, according to Krauss (2002, p.48) Rauschenberg's 'materialized image' operates. If one considers Rauschenberg's work *Rebus* (Figure 71), from a spatio-temporal perspective, one cannot overly stress its randomness, for there is also at work a gesturing towards a sense of cohesion, which is allied to its overt refusal of the Greenbergian (1993, p.81) 'at-onceness' or of an overall field in its presentation of (non-)linear time.

Likewise, the problematic of pictorial flatness is taken up by Rauschenberg and Breer not in terms of a visionary and potentially infinite space (as implied by the Abstract Expressionists), but as a materialized play of textures and restricted depths. It is also evocative of the sphere of memory, as Krauss (2002, p.52) points out, particularly with the suggestive equalization of the density of the image-objects that are 'suspended in the medium', as well as, an awareness of their resistance to being formally incorporated (or ordered). Even so, the image *Rebus* is striking for

the ways in which Rauschenberg also (conceptually) directs the viewer's attention by shifting from the linear schema of the horizon's time-line to the seemingly more random passageways in the image and the associations, which flow, dart, jump and dissociate, from the rebus-like form of the image-objects whose confined surface and typographical density is in turn temporally layered, as image-objects are brought to the foreground or sent back and recede, in partial obscurity.



Figure 69. Breer, *Eyewash*, (2 stills).

While the materialization of image-objects in the filmic 'space-image' of Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.18) work is invariably temporal and must deal with the unavoidably sequential fact of cinema, *Eyewash*, 1959 is also structured to challenge the emphasis on narrative and chronological significance within perception. The film foregrounds a 'wash' of divergent currents within the imagery and attends to the *quality* of motion, linked to gestural mark-making that is a textural interplay of light and a pushing of the capacity of the lens and shutter. This is in contrast to the brief segments produced by the single-frame flicker-effect of monochrome colors.

Eyewash presents a liminal barrage of imagery with sudden and unexpected spatio-temporal shifts, as well as directing the viewer's attention to the differing densities of the image-space. The 'pictorial surface' of the screen is revealed, in conjunction with the *flat-bed picture-plane* (Steinberg, 2002, p.30) whose limited differential depths are explored in detail, confounded, obscured and overwritten (Figure 65-8). Many of these unexpected actions and washes of movement, simultaneously direct the eye toward the reflexive treatment of the film's material-content, which imparts a degree of overall, meta-cohesion or sense of synchronization, not dissimilarly to the associative-dissociations and structural contrasts and disparities suggestively at play in *Rebus*, and which is done in a manner that does not exactly 'order' the image but opens the work and perception in manifold ways, as will shortly be examined in *Eyewash*.

Opening up the idea of film, Breer (Levine, 1973, p.9) asserts that he ‘got very deep into mixing diverse material’ working with the tensions that arise from abrupt changes, and discontinuity. He also gives an indication of the centrality that such formal relationships present for his process, which become impelled by the exploration, not of ‘purity’, but of the equivocality of film’s materiality, stating, ‘I wanted to examine it more closely, and bring it into the open, to expose it, and so forth’. Touching in the same interview on the craft and dexterity that is needed to present such concerns, Breer adds, ‘the clue to what I do has something to do with ambiguity, and controlling ambiguity and making it dramatic. Shapes, relationships are very complex and are played off against each other [...] and this is another way of using material to express... not to express ambiguities but to use that as an element, using material to... get ambiguity as an expressive feature of the thing.’



Figure 70. Breer, *Eyewash*, (reminiscent of French New Realism décollage, 2 stills).

Discussing the broadly ‘Whitmanesque’ sensibility¹¹³ and the jogged, dissociative attention of the urbanite’s ‘vernacular glance’, that prevails in Rauschenberg’s work, O’Doherty (1973, pp.194, 198) also differentiates it from the antithetically and (politically) incisive juxtapositions of Dada montage, or the elegantly poised aesthetic cohesion imparted by Schwitters’ Dada *Merz*, and argues that the cultivation, in the picture-plane, is principally of an ‘open situation’. In this way, it is argued that the neo-dada surface resonates with an apperception of the expanding media world, and magnifies the discontinuities of its informational format; the scanning and clipping of the newspaper, the interruptions and channel-flipping of television, radio sound-bites, although this was largely without the subterranean, hostile ironies levelled at consumer and popular culture in some early Pop artwork.

Instead, this particular pre-Pop sensibility, as O’Doherty (1973, p.193) notes, is potentially

¹¹³ This can be characterized as a broadening of subject matter, involving the everyday, colloquial, and slang etc., and expressing an experience of the world permeated with democratic inclusions. Clearly also apt for Breer’s work.

compromised by the emulation of the non-commitment, or *open neutrality* in the image through a seemingly careless, incautious, inclusive generosity of objects. Insightfully, however, O'Doherty continues that it is suggestive of a juncture after the apex of abstraction, which substantively imparts 'to subject matter the richness and ambiguity of abstract painting'. To borrow from Krauss' (2002, p.52) astute critique of Rauschenberg's deflationary approach and rejection of a 'transcendent' perspective within his pictures, one might also say, of Breer's approach, (that stretches, one could argue, back to the legacy of Schwitters' work), that 'the answer lies not in the power of the conventional image to transcend reality, but in the power of [the] use of images to transform the space of convention.'

In the context of Rauschenberg's work, but also of Breer's refusal of the dogmatic ideology of form, which is developed with his attention to thresholds, and rejection of the ascription of meaning tied to the subject of the artist, it is worth touching on Barthes' figure of the Neutral, which 'remains structural'. It is that which effectively 'outplays' or 'baffles the paradigm', Barthes (2005, pp.6-7, 10) argues, continuing that 'the exposition of the nondogmatic cannot itself be dogmatic.' Rather, in theorizing the Neutral, he sets out to reframe the dominance of 'conflict as meaning' (p.128) and its production, as rooted in arrogance. Barthes (p.152) situates the 'arrogance of discourse' as the Neutral's antonym and stresses it is accrued by the 'claim to authority, the guarantee of dogmatic truth or of a demand that doesn't think, that doesn't conceive of the other's desire. One is assaulted by the arrogance of discourse everywhere there is faith, certitude, will-to-possess, to dominate[...]'.

Many of the underlying tendencies of the early post-war neo-avant-garde are powerfully expressed through the neo-dadaist assisted-readymades, and for example in the 'combines' of Rauschenberg, that utilize non-traditional materials along with industrial and everyday found objects, and which began as expanded sculpture and sculpturally expanded paintings, but could also be understood to present a loose mimicry of these various artistic discourses. The criticality of the neo-avant-garde has typically, in the convention of Bürger's (1984) *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 1974, been rendered simply reflective of intensified capitalism and therefore complicit. But the particular conjuncture of art, aesthetics, the everyday, and the social, can be re-examined in works such as, *Rebus*. In this light, Rauschenberg's (Miller, 1959, p.58) famously quoted artist statement for the catalogue and MoMA exhibition of *Sixteen Americans*, 1959 could be interpreted as countering the ascription of art, in this period, of predominately 'making it new'. Rather a gesture of historical awareness underpins his emphasis on a neutrally 'empirical' approach when he states: 'Painting relates to both art and life. Neither can be made. (I try to act in the gap between the two.)'



Figure 71. Rauschenberg, *Rebus*, 1955, (2.44mx3.33m, oil, collage on canvas).

Contributing much to shifting the parameters of the debate about the avant-garde, Foster's (1996, p.21) collection of essays comprising *The Return of the Real* with roots in the earlier essay, 'What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-garde' (1994, p.15) refutes the customary refrain that would describe its appearance - first as tragedy, then as farce. The 'becoming-institutional of the avant-garde' (1996, p.24) has subsequently been elaborated in terms of the neo-avant-garde's staging and re-articulation of an open-ended mediation between the inherited aspects of artistic tradition and changes within the social sphere of experience in response to the intensification of capitalism. This is done in a way that revalues the potentiality of aesthetic reason, which repudiates the anxiety about art's collapse into a means-end rationalization. What ensues from the post-WWII neo-avant-garde, as Groys (2010, p.2) notes, is that the traditions of our contemporary artworld and its institutions have become established.

Rebus presents (structural) reflections not only of its own painterly processes and perception, but also problematizes the status of mark-making by registering its different forms – the action of 'expressionist' gestures in relation to the Abstract expressionist's drips, stains and washes, along with the conceptualization of graffiti, scribbles and text, etc. The work also questions the earlier constructive correlations between material's formal qualities (typically paper, metal, wood etc.)

and the accrued meaning of modernist art. It presents, instead, its own particular dynamic interplay between the structuration and potentially 'transgressive facticity' (Foster, 1996, p.24) of more urban and domestic everyday materials (street posters, a tea-towel, photographic and print-matter, domestic fabrics, 'paper' paint samples etc.). Conversely, the strong aspect of its coincidental appearance simultaneously points outward towards socio-historical transformations and the intensified 1950s commercial environment of the times with its impact on subjectivation.

Rebus is generally considered to mark a shift from previous works that utilized more apparently autobiographical and potentially nostalgic elements (with a souvenir quality) to a more impersonal journalistic portrayal of urban life. It is often cited by Rauschenberg (Joseph, 2007, p.139) to be part of a pedestrian series that renders a particular environ and temporality. Compared to the domestic scale of, for instance, European collages by Schwitters, which is often related to the scale of easel painting, and mostly compelled by the hand-held size of the found paper objects, the painting *Rebus* takes on a purportedly American sense of scale, then prevalent in Abstract Expressionist paintings, made possible by inexpensive, but large loft studios in e.g. New York. But unlike the all-over field of Abstract Expressionism, as the title *Rebus* (i.e. the representation of words by things, especially pictures and symbols) suggests, the device and 'duration' of reading the image is evoked and at play.

However, Craft (2013, p.52) argues that while the title, *Rebus*, refers to processes of signification, a literal interpretation of the title is undercut, as Rauschenberg's work creates a 'profusion in meaning as well as materials,' which suggests a relation to image-objects within rapidly shifting contexts, akin, as mentioned, to one's perception within the spectacle of urban everyday life. The process of the image also implies a concern with the over-exposure to imagery in a mediatised urban context, with the sense of its invariable depletion or usurpation by other meanings and contexts. Furthermore, the 'non-specificity' (Taylor, 2004, p.174) of the objects included, and of their relationships is often, in a general sense, considered resistant to the more totalizing perspective within intensified commercial and administrative modernity. Despite the refusal of specificity, and in terms of its over-all pictorial form, however, *Rebus* in my opinion simultaneously evokes an aerial view and the urban skyline itself, a cityscape with the jostling of 'building' blocks.

Of interest in relation to Breer's film *Eyewash* which resists its own filmic sequentiality, is the way *Rebus* plays with variations, repetition, and the interchange-ability of its pictorial word associations, but which despite the discourse of non-specificity, nevertheless coheres along and around the timeline 'running' through the centre of the image of coloured slips of paper. (This motif is redoubled by the semantic play with the action-photographs of competing runners

arranged on either side of the canvas.) The trajectory of the running, likewise, sets up a temporal structure, for the 'reading' of the painting, and evokes a sense of duration whose frames literally determine the length of the image, and loosely anticipates this structural aspect of minimalist painting. This structure is recursively echoed in the dimensions of the three large canvas panels, which give a sense of the potential arbitrariness of the image's triptych construction, as well as the possibility of limitless extensions and raises the problematic of the seriality of its structure. The timeline is composed of tiny fields, or static frames creating a colourful visual rhythm of paper paint-samples, which would seem an ironic reference to the discourse of the monochrome, but likewise foregrounds a deflationary relation to paint as an industrial product, in its domestic range of non purist, a-signifying colours. One cannot help but think of Breer's early presentation of monochrome flicker-frames of coloured light in *Eyewash* as contributing to this neo-dada conversation, as well as, the triptych structure of his film *Jamestown Balloos*, 1957.

The linear, almost flicker-like structuration in *Rebus* is juxtaposed with the iconic sequencing and serialized nature of newspaper comics, one of which is partly obscured by the reproduction of the singular image, Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus'. It presents another reference to time, to the paradoxical interval of 'birth' or arrival of the fully formed goddess of love, Venus. The subject of platonic 'love' and adoration of the female form is with deflationary humour contrasted with the lavatory-style doodle of a reclining exposed woman on the 'canvas' of a tea towel, hanging from the time-line that now takes on the guise of a taut washing line. The instantaneous birth of Venus is bound on either side with the visual quip of 'time flies', which is evoked by the literal images of flies interspersed along the image time-line.

This viewpoint however is counteracted, slowed down, magnified, particularly by the mosaic sense of perspective presented in the close up of one of the insect's eyes, the invitation to closer inspection. Other figurations of time can be found in the decisive photographic moment, which captures the speed and stasis of 'running' in the two different but comparable action shots of sprinters racing. Within this 'reading' the organic geometric texture-block of red fabric stretching flatly across the right-hand canvas, and above the right-hand racing shot comes to suggest a finish line banner pulled at an angle perpendicular to the flow of action.

This race may be contrasted with an electoral contest or race on the left-hand canvas, in which each literally repeated poster has been singly defaced and altered. These elements in turn along with the static almost flicker-like effect of the monochrome fields of the color-samples, reverberate against the punctuating 'event' of the fluid action of the drips of running paint whose particular moment of cessation is captured. This gesture in turn is contrasted to various modes of mark-making, such as the deKooningesque gestures above the loose blocked out textural space

of yellow, the defacing graffiti scribbles on the street poster, the light energetic Twombly-like scrawling below the burgundy block of drips. At the evidently incongruous right-to-left finish, and above the electoral race posters is the partially voided self-reflexive text, which foregrounds the enunciative aspect of conceptual art which is literalized in the statement, 'that repre' –sents, reversing the flow of the act of reading left-to-right, and redirecting the viewer to have an actively scattered look back across the image with the open-ended question, what is represented?

Recapturing Breer's Neo-dada Attitude in Film

In Burford's (1999, p.88) important survey of Breer's work published by the experimental cinema distributor Re:Voir, his films are divided into various categories, such as, graphic cinema which is periodized between 1952-56, color and movement films, collage films, and neo-dada films. The works ascribed as neo-dada films were largely produced in the 1960s in a direct association with the now canonical neo-dada figures, such as, Tinguely, e.g. Breer's *Homage to Jean Tinguely's Homage to New York*, 1960 (Chapter 2), as well as, his film *Pat's Birthday*, 1962 in association with Pat and Claes Oldenburg. Sitney's (2002, p.270) periodization or categorization of Breer is set up in relation to the 'graphic cinema of Eggeling, Richter, Duchamp, and Lye [which is] without the mediation of the Abstract Expressionistic and mythopoetic phases'. Yet, in terms of 'graphic cinema' it has been important in this thesis to explore more specifically the avant-garde force present in the aesthetic research of the absolute film, *Rhythmus 21*, 1921, by Richter and how this finds a novel and overt expression in Breer's own lyrical critique of the strictures of neo-plasticism within the 'graphic cinema' of *Form Phases IV*, 1954 (Chapter 1).

Likewise, it is essential to challenge the categorization of *Eyewash*, 1959 by Burford (1999, p.86) and others, in which it is seen in the general and largely ahistorically aesthetic terms of exploring the possibilities of 'color and movement.' Sitney (2002, p.277) likewise notes, for instance, 'with *Eyewash*, Breer ended his work in defining the threshold between flat animation and photographed actuality by means of freezes and movements fractions of a second long. [...] After finishing *Eyewash* Breer moved back to the United States. His return coincided with the decline of Abstract Expressionism as the dominant movement in American painting and slightly preceded the emergence of Pop Art.'

It should be noted that Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.29) also discusses being back for visits to the US, such as, in 1957, so his sense of the discourse of art and its movements in the US and Europe would likely have been more fluid than such divisions may imply. Furthermore, Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.8) considers the implications of the particular (transcendental, formal)

‘open-endedness’ that the canvases of the Abstract Expressionists’ invite, which becomes reflected in shifts within the works and thinking of neo-avant-garde figures, such as, Rauschenberg, and I would argue, Breer.

Sitney (2002, p.277) continues by arguing that *Eyewash* anticipates the subjective abstract expressionistic films by Brakhage of a decade later maintaining that *Eyewash* is a crude prefiguration, which ‘lacks the visionary coherence and passionate commitment’ of the latter. Such a reading disregards Breer’s provocative elaboration of neo-dada concerns within his cinematic collage. Its formal concentration on modes of looking and the subversion of conventions brushes against aspects of previous major art-historical movements to question the primacy of the visual as part of its content. To these ends, *Eyewash* will be discussed shortly to elucidate the critical coherence of its own particular incursion into the realm of ‘random order’, with Breer (Coté, 1962, p.19) likewise refusing the ascription to his work of ‘disorder’ preferring to discuss its ‘anti-continuity’.

In a passing reference to Rauschenberg, Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.25) declares, ‘I felt I was doing real collages that had all the Rauschenberg combinations but were also dynamic and rhythmic, a real step forward from Schwitters, who I admired very much.’ Breer continues by discussing the implication in cinematic collage of destabilizing the formal and perceptual relationship between the thing, and the trajectory of motion. Giving credence to Breer’s concerns, it becomes important to shift from the predominant emphasis placed in *Eyewash*, by Sitney et. al., on its ‘highly edited, gestural style, with obviously personal imagery’ (p.28) and to counter the misdirected assessment of it in relation to the highly romantic films of Brakhage and Mekas. It is not the eyewash of the visionary, but the film’s at times brusque structuration of vision, with its concern for the liminal thresholds of visibility within the apparatus and filmic ‘space-image’, refiguring the everyday and the personal as part of a critique, not as an assumption of presence.

Breer’s Gestures:

Structuring the Expressionistic in Blazes, 1961

✂

the Photographic in Eyewash, 1959

‘I’d written a piece on abstract expressionism as being just fossilized evidence that some action had taken place previously and that film could actually give you the action while you

were looking at it; you didn't have to look at streaks of dried paint anymore, you could look at streaks of liveaction.' Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.31)

Breer continues that he attempted to test the principles roughly outlined above, more systematically in his film *Blazes*, 1961, 3min. To a considerable extent it takes the single-frame exploration exemplified first in *Recreation*, 1956 but foregoes the filmic collage of a wide-range of image-objects, things, as well as the presentation of different conventions within painting, by limiting its palette to the textures of mark-making including gestural painterly abstraction, streaks, watercolour washes and a lighter cursive script-like line-drawing. In the 1975 Filmmaker's Co-op catalogue inclusion of the work, Breer, (Burford, 1999, p.116) states that *Blazes* is '100 basic images switching positions for 4000 frames.' In this way, the work may be considered in the genre of experimental film as having a 'purer', honed and minimal structure that is sustained by its overall trajectory and speed.



Figure 72. Breer, *Blazes*, 1961, (3min, 16mm, 8 stills).

Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.19) earlier account of *Blazes* from the perspective of the perceptual struggle to grasp the individual form of its images, proposes that the process shatters and fragments the customary experience of continuity, 'The succession of abstract pictures follow so quickly and are so different from one to the next that one doesn't accurately see any one picture, but has the impression of thousands. [...] He [sic: the viewer] can no longer anticipate the images and is too bombarded to remember past images.' Elsewhere discussing the interruption of filmic continuity, Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.44) contends, 'I have what amounts to a static picture where everything is on the brink of flowing into motion but never quite does.'

Even while the painterly 'flatness' of the film's images, composed on index-cards and translated onto celluloid frames, and the surface screen of its projection are held in tension, the stress in the film as a 'static picture' is kept graphically *alive*, partly by what Breer (p.22) calls an 'all-over active screen'. This entails the repudiation of the animated convention of a moving object in the

foreground on a fixed field, or lifeless background. This active approach to the filmic image is, as Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.163) describes it, a declaration of kineticism that is paradoxically also its denial, and becomes fundamentally ‘anti-kinetic’.

Even so, unlike the evident juxtaposition and conflicting disparity of forms and objects, which constitute the tension in *Recreation*, the looser organic and formless flames of each image in *Blazes* give way at certain points to a veritable torrent of static frames. This dynamic, conversely, is not produced by a contrast of pure colours that is part of the indisputably static monochromatic flicker evident in a segment of *Eyewash*.¹¹⁴ The underlying anti-kinetic strategy of *Blazes* is undercut or dynamized, and ‘the principle violated’ as Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) states, by the periodic sensation of ‘flowing back in space’, which creates a staccato plummet into the impressionistic chasm of a cinematic cave.



Figure 73. Breer, *Eyewash*, (2 stills).

It is interesting to consider Breer’s concern with new implications of Abstract Expressionism for film as suggested by the opening quote on p.171, as well as to turn to the film *Eyewash* finished a year after a 1958 exhibition in Paris of new American painting with its emphasis on Abstract Expressionism that is generally seen by many to mark the transference of cultural prestige in the art world from Paris to America, and which is described by Breer in an interview with Mendelson (1981, p.8) as ‘overwhelming, There was no way for the Paris art world to... ignore it anymore.’¹¹⁵ In the same conversation, as mentioned previously, Breer contrasts these new implications to the ‘art of concrete orthodoxy’ of Richter’s singular focus on the frame, in whose legacy he notes, ‘we’d been building everything into that rectangle.’

¹¹⁴ Image Source: (Breer, 1959, pp.stills: 158, 164).

¹¹⁵ Breer recalls the Sweeney show of American Abstract Expressionist paintings. See also: MoMA traveling exhibition of ‘The New American Painting’ 1958-59 curated by Dorothy C. Miller.

Referring to the ‘open-endedness’ of Abstract Expressionist paintings, Breer is galvanized by the movement’s expansion of the frame, ‘compositions were getting opened – the idea of the surface extending beyond the frame. I saw the frame as getting to be arbitrary and of course that helped very much support the idea about filmic form’. However, in keeping with Breer’s aesthetic of exploring the mechanics of cinematic collage, this is qualified by a suspicion of the Romantic subject of action painting (p.171), and the impartial tone of his interest taken in the transcendental associations with which such works were surrounded, particularly ‘the idea of infinity, of a continuum’ that is ostensibly presented.

In its inclusive pre-pop mode, however, *Eyewash* does not shun illustrative elements, and is a complex, multifaceted, experimental, non-narrative, collage film of an array of animated techniques: paint-on-film, the positive shape of cut-outs becoming the negative space of layer-masks and vice versa, monochrome flicker, as well as in-camera pixilation, multiple-exposures etc. The surprisingly varied degree of shallow surface intensities explored by abstract expressionist, harder-edged geometric modes, along with graffiti-esque, cursive script (that is variously utilized in the contemporaneous works of Rauschenberg, Twombly etc.) are, moreover, particularized by their textural and animated function within the filmic ‘image-space’. This ‘image-space’ plays out technically in the constricted field under the rostrum camera, in the capacity of the lens, e.g. depth of focus, motion blur, long exposures etc., and is expanded further by the meta-surface of the celluloid filmstrip and the apparatus of its projection onto the screen wall. The wall itself takes on a sense of transparency, as the film was originally designed to be shown on a gallery’s window, as Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.161) notes, ‘some of the images are reversed, because I wanted the public to be able to see both from inside and outside, so you could see it from the street.’



Figure 74. Breer, *Eyewash*.

The taut spatial dynamics of these graphic modes of photographed abstraction are furthermore contrasted with the illusion of depth by intercutting brief segments of live-action that are

reminiscent of home-movies and found-footage. The film evokes a certain self-reflexive awareness in its correlation between movements, such as, 'direct' hand-held camera motion, and 'gestural abstraction' associated with action painting, as well as, touching on the painterly problematic of pictorial 'flatness' initiated by cubism, which has subsequently become associated with the complex *medium-specificity* of film.

'Concentration, awareness, and even a heightened use of the picture plane', Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) argues, is connected to the 'idea of painting as a concrete object.' Allied to these discourses of art, *Eyewash* is a translation that still allows for an immediate craft-based experimentation within film. Mendelson's (1981, pp.40-1) interview gives a sense of the gamut of Breer's practice when he notes, 'I might sacrifice the whole process for the sake of that instant' and equally, 'the other end of the scale is thinking purely in terms of change itself and giving no concern to the surface quality at all and trying to make a relationship which denies each split second identity.' Elsewhere, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.51) characterizes his artisanal process as a 'kinaesthetic' interrogation of the liminal bounds of vision and expresses the integral aesthetic connection in sense perception between vision and tactility, texture and proximity, pointing towards the embodied relation of haptic visuality.

It is worth repeating in a new context, Breer's (Macdonald, 1992, p.39) statement, 'Ideas float in the air like the flu, and a lot of people get them at the same time.' Breer's approach to film as a 'space-image', or cinematic collage, is an integral part of his endeavour to broach the problematic of time, not only in terms of the threshold between the still and moving-image, as is often stressed, but also in the dis-continuity sought in the interval between form and action. This is intensified by the irreverent, or to a degree *aesthetically indifferent* attention given to the range of artistic means utilized, while being always led by Breer's continual attempt to disabuse the viewer of the comfort anticipated in conventional modes of spectatorship be it within the field of animation or fine art. Breer makes an allusion to *medium-specificity*, in his exploration of the single-frame basis of cinema but it is paradoxically utilized in a way that presents a negation of what Osborne (2002, p.31) has criticized as the 'monistic materialism' (of Greenbergian modernism). Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.165) touches on the fundamental problematic of the 'collage nature of film' by foregrounding the dynamic between images, their alteration and repetition.

Similarly, Breer's work often sustains an indexical relation to the world in the way that its image-objects are incorporated, and this is forged, one might argue, in terms of the 'materialized image' (Krauss, 2002, p.48). One might consider the underlying affect of form in relation to the image-content, such as the prominent and at times even kitschy 'rainbow' (Figure 68) in *Eyewash*, as well as its variations which become associated with optics, light, colour, and abstraction, that points to

the flat curving bands of parallel colour somewhere between earlier Delaunay paintings and the contemporaneous colour field work of Morris Louis. An example of the 'rainbow' colour banding can also be seen on the left edge of Figure 73, and the non-gestural but still expressively communicative concerns about pictorial space associated with such colour-field explorations is immediately complicated, in this film-still, by its proximity to an illustratively drawn tree that is partially masked by white hand-cut card, as well as an empty work-glove.

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What would also seem to be at play here is the way that despite working traditionally with lens-based media, animators have not normally been concerned with the signifying functions of photography, as such, beyond using the rostrum-camera to document work, or to translate sequential images into motion. The latent capacity of these originally filmed image-sequences was for the most part meticulously concealed by a concerted focus upon the graphic elaborations of other more improbable and imaginative worlds. With the comically 'lifeless' empty glove (Figure 73) Breer, however, would seem to foreground the intrusive qualities of animation, as when, on rare occasions, the accidental flash and flutter of the animator's hand is flagrantly laid bare within the shot, or manifested in the idiosyncratic, unpredictable and by now quaint, often jittery, quality of hand-generated motion, or glimpsed in the flutter of fingerprints across Claymation plasticine, and in the spirited rustling of a scene's background fabric or character's garments.

The unoccupied glove suggests manual, constructive possibilities while simultaneously questioning the figure of the artist via the synecdoche of the hand, the expressivity of the artist in 'direct' gestures of paint, the handcrafted image, as well as of haptic perception, or the tactility of vision within cinema. Such correlations likewise persist in the association of so-called 'direct' measures, for instance, of the hand-held camera, the insistent continuum of a practice that is especially marked in the framing of some of Brakhage's later abstract expressionist paint- and scratch-on-film. In *Eyewash*, however, Breer would seem to question the deference to the authority of the artist or 'author', the return to romantic individualism and to the aestheticization of abstraction and form, in whose way lies the danger, as Barthes (1977b) in 'The Death of the Author' has warned about imposing a conventionally constrictive interpretive framework upon the text.

The trope of the hand is subverted again, as the image of fingertips become a bold black and white graphic shape, evoking monoliths on the horizon, viewing slits of a possible zoetrope etc. (Figure 75) and recurs in a multitude of ways throughout the film but also seems to ironize those typically accidental moments in which the animation-artist intrudes and is inserted into the work.

Equally one might consider how Breer plays with shifts in which the seemingly contingent and arbitrary aspect of the photographic becomes coded, as is the case in the image of a perplexing street scene outside of a busy workshop. The image of a man hunched over a workbench, cuts away on the action, as his plank of wood splits in two (Figure 74). This twists from a reference to the splicing of film itself, and furthermore becomes layered with connotations of the verbs to see/saw, presenting the film's question implicitly through a visual pun as to what of the image and its construction has been discerned.



Figure 75. Breer, *Eyewash*, (2 stills).

It is also of interest to note, here, that as part of the extension of the frame, Breer presents non-art elements, such as, the incorporation in the image of numbers, (Figure 67, 73), which indicate preparatory materials, frame numbers from the back of index-cards, a suggestion of calculations, film-timing etc. These numerical figures, which indicate various different frames, are then drawn together, synthesized and recomposed to make a new image, one that may not have actual visibility during the continuous flow of the moving-image, as Breer (Mendelson, 1981, p.33) explains, because it is projected ‘relentlessly at twenty-four frames per second. All material, therefore, is subjected to this pace’.

One might also consider within Breer's work, the quality evinced by modes of image-making which become almost tangible by the use of commercial and ‘low-value’ ready-to-hand tools and materials, expressed by his use of felt-pens and hand-cut scissor edges. Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.47) discusses in relation to a later film how utilizing such tools, in this case ‘Zip-A-Tone’ (industrial pre-printed lines, textures, screentone patterns, letters etc.) can take ‘the sentimentality out of the line, you know, lines are enervated, like free-flowing cartoons. And that has a certain quality I was trying to eliminate and so the films are more brittle, the edges sharp... it's a kind of intellectual comment that takes place in that film all the time.’ (Figure 26, 65)

Also unmistakable in *Eyewash* is how photographic elements are included, in such a way that foregrounds issues around the then-called ‘transparency’ of live-action in contrast with the graphic constructions of the horizontal field of the *flatbed picture-plane*. The characterization of the *flatbed picture-plane*, is made by Steinberg (2002, p.30) in a later interpretation of Rauschenberg’s paintings, and alludes to the print-shop workbench of typography, chartboards, etc. upon which objects are scattered and data is entered, suggesting that ‘any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane – radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man’s visual field.’

Breer (Beauvais, 2006, pp.166, 165) discusses the density of the image dynamics he utilizes in a relationship to perception and memory, whose ostensibly *random order* and implicit structuration compete with the ‘serial’ and ‘linear exposition’ of film. Or, as mentioned earlier, with the film *Blazes* even the liminal sense of the ‘serial imagery’, the individual repetition of images is energetically negated or disavowed by the film’s mechanics and the swift pace of the ‘space-image’. Such aspects are further complicated and expanded by film’s broader technical reproducibility, which taken together, as Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.165) argues, affords cinema its profound ‘heterogeneity’ and ‘eclecticism’. Or, as Breer (Coté, 1962, p.17) states elsewhere, ‘The consecutive fact of film allows for everything!’

the Aesthetic Logic of Breer’s Experimental Transcategorical Process



the Shifting Polemics of the (Post-)Medium Condition in Contemporary Debates

When Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.49) states, ‘I think of the films as objects [...] blocks of time, in which no time takes place’, I take Breer to mean that the approach of his films to visuality, comes to prioritize perception and the situation of its reception. Likewise the tactics utilized, do not aim to conventionally represent, or narrativize time, but comprise ‘synthetic films’, as Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.46) states, in which a destructive approach to ‘fracturing, shattering the image’ (p.44) is taken. This perspective is not, for instance, an applied, constructive analysis of how film synthesizes the continuity of motion, nor does it provide the cohesion of gesture and form typified by the animation industry. Discussing this, at root, anti-dogmatic stance, Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.164) remarks, ‘that’s a very important ingredient: destruction of authority, destruction of logic’.

Such an approach has an interesting resonance with the way that sense is produced within aesthetic practice, or how its abstract structuration becomes conceptually transformative or

informative, regarding the problematic of time and form of collage-paintings. Breer's approach has correspondences with the notion of 'reading' the image, and the way (painterly) action is indexed and exceeded in a parallel gesture to Rauschenberg's *Rebus*, 1956. While discussing Breer's *Form Phases IV*, and later works that have a more concerted and prolonged use of monochromatic flicker, as well as, bold graphic contrasts, Mendelson (1981, p.24) argues such an approach has resonance with the presence-ing of 1960s painting through the 'sheer opticality of the image-content'.

It is the argument of this thesis, however, that Breer's approach is part of an equivocal interplay or downplay of pure visuality, or opticality through an overt complication of the visible that is rooted in a technical and (para-)conceptual approach to film. In *Form Phases IV*, (Chapter 1), Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) presents a subversion of the 'fixity' of hard-edged abstraction which disturbs the 'presence' of meaning that was felt to previously prevail within modernist aestheticism. As suggested at the outset here, in relation to *Eyewash*, and which it can be argued continues even with Breer's later return to graphic abstraction, the eclecticism of his attitude and approach involve a technical and conceptual complication of the transcendental presence-ing of the subject of Abstract Expressionism.¹¹⁶

To return to the initial quote (p.171) of Breer eschewing the fossilized image of (subjective) action by romantic Abstract Expressionism, it is worth noting how Breer raises this in his work as part of the materialization (not the reification) of the image, and which is rooted in the question of film's form and the mechanics of the moving-image. The problematics of action and question of the stakes of representation are likewise conceptualized in Tinguely's (2011b, p.336) deployment of an airborne leaflet propaganda drop to disseminate his *Manifesto For Statics*, 1959, of the same period. The manifesto asserts, although in a highly spectacular manner, both an aesthetic and social injunction to traditional hierarchies and values that attempts to reinvigorate the relation to the real by directing recipients to, 'Stop painting time. Stop evoking movement and gesture. You are movement and gesture.'

To understand the relation between the form and technics of the image as immanently explored in Breer's work, one might initially feel that the broad sources of imagery, and pictorial modes brought together in collage films like *Eyewash* have an ahistorical, non-critical, ironic stylization that is associated with late *postmodern* tendencies in art. However, the concern with, and facility for

¹¹⁶ The Abstract Expressionist apolitically autonomous and masculinist gesture of presence-ing has, for instance, been critiqued from a non-canonical perspective gaining meaning rather, based on what is negated, and absent, and in which its form arises out of the questions of its socio-historical juncture. Osborne (1991, p.68) for instance, notes of expressionism that its purported 'elimination of a socially substantive subjectivity, as an alienated protest against alienation can take either progressive or reactionary forms.'

aesthetic juxtapositions have a structural logic or sensibility that develops out of an earlier disruption in which Breer confronts the paradoxically limitless possible variations and differential repetitions generated in the pursuit of ‘absolute’ neo-plastic forms. To these ends, it is worth reiterating Breer’s (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) pointed statement, ‘I think any art discipline, or any kind of expressive disciplines are arbitrary. [...] they’re perfectly open to complete violation.’

The centrality of operating with such contradictions is extended by Breer’s early exploration and aesthetic research of graphic processes in an experimental manner across a range of mediums. As has been touched upon in Chapter 3, Breer (Beauvais, 2006) describes utilizing slide projection technology as a surface for painting, re-filming the results, as well as, filming the development of a painting, or *non-painting* held in the image of the film. Of the divergent but homologously connected use of media that is associated with the serial operations of animation, one can similarly point to the index-card based imagery of *Blazes*. This is likewise founded on the principle of the flipbook (kineograph) that is also presented by Breer as an art object. And such imagery is further instanced in the Mutoscopes, which were also built and exhibited by Breer.

These various modes and the single-frame form of its imagery are incorporated, and comprise fundamental aspects of the filmic process. By expanding the technological and aesthetic range of traditional mediums (moving paintings, kinetic sculpture), Breer’s approach begins to expose the parameters and critical limits of the ontology of art in terms of *medium-specificity*. The Greenbergian discourse, dominant for two decades in post-war America, primarily locates art’s criticality in the affirmation of *medium-specific* properties of historically established forms, such as painting, sculpture etc. Even with the subsequently expanded plurality of art it becomes, Osborne (2013, p.81) argues, demolished by certain movements (e.g. critical conceptualism) and to a great extent by technological advances. The later effects of this destabilization (in, say, the unmoored multiplicity of installation art, relational aesthetics etc.) are explored partly in terms of a lament of the *postmedium condition* by Krauss. Nevertheless, while aspects of formalist modernism may be currently experiencing a revival, it is Osborne (2013, p.81) argues, ‘essentially a nineteenth-century tradition.’¹¹⁷

Yet, the significance and implications of how images rearticulate medium *differential-specificity* (Krauss, 1999a, pp.44, 53) or become ‘*answerable* to productive techniques’ (Osborne, 2003, p.64) persists more specifically in terms of how material-content and form become conceptually *mediated*. Such mediation, in Osborne’s framework, in the sphere of critical contemporary postconceptual art recalls the radical sense of the 1960s *transcategorical* critique, which attempted to

¹¹⁷ Osborne’s (2013, p.19) historical perspective considers that movements in art of the 1960s present an ‘ontological break in the object-based and medium specific neo-avant-garde practices’.

move beyond ‘expanded’ fields, but which stalled as its evaluation is secured back to a particular medium. Breer’s nondogmatic aesthetics, in this perspective, is underpinned by his venture into construction and (affirmative) negation operative in works that traverse such disciplines and discourses but could polemically be argued to simultaneously be *not-painting*, *not-film*, and *not-animation*. This is evident in works, such as *Eyewash*, whose proto-structural approach to film points *always already* to post structuralist-film and acts as a vital crucible in which these larger historical forces are seen at work.

Within the scope of this practice, technically expanded by its single-frame aesthetic, Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.157) also remarks that the ‘process was more interesting than the product.’ The way in which Breer’s process, or ‘aesthetic research’ (Richter) takes in a range of pre-cinematic animation techniques has been suggested in relation to the *Form Phases* series, which encompasses (pre-)cinematic objects. In this manner, one can also argue that Breer’s exploration and re-figuration of traditional animation techniques presents an early experience of the *analogue convergence of media*. This approach could be seen to deal with the early implications of what today is experienced as the *digital convergence of media*. Or, likewise, it could be related to digital *remediation*¹¹⁸ in which aspects of painting and ‘still’ photography, live-action film, the (anti)kinetic dynamic of film, and the cinema-situation are repurposed by the ‘new’ investigations and the utilization within the sphere of Art of the non-traditional medium of animation (not the discipline of traditional animation).

The multidisciplinary and *transcategorical* approach in Breer’s work with its immanent investigations of the filmic form, nevertheless has effects upon the discursive formation of the field of the moving-image and artists’ film. Breer’s approach stretches previously held disciplinary limits, and amplifies art’s own movement toward transdisciplinarity in such a way that plays with the conventions of visuality and contests the reification of form, and the bureaucratic organization of knowledge.

Heterogeneity and Material Limitations of the Filmic (qua Photographic) Image & its Implications in Contemporary Debates

Breer’s concrete approach and conceptual *mediation* of the heterogeneity of its graphic means and the photographic convergence of media afforded by film is, he argues, facilitated by the possibilities of its processes and remains entirely relevant. Such an attitude is also figured in

¹¹⁸ The phrase is coined by Bolter and Grusin (2000, p.19) in *Remediation: Understanding New Media* indicating the process by which a *medium* repurposes and refashions other media, both antecedent and contemporary. It is usually associated with the digital remediation of older technology and techniques such as those used by film and photography.

Breer's (1973a, p.70) childhood anecdote about his father's 3D camera invention and desire for greater 'realism', which is matched by Breer's own concomitant 'modernist' and (neo-) avant-garde appreciation of the need to reveal cinema's limits, its basic 'edge problem'. Breer's work, such as *Eyewash*, revisits, recreates and expands on how the concerns of a modernist and avant-garde conception of photography invariably begin to complicate the notion of the medium itself. Roberts (2009, p.287), provides a proviso for photography's complex realism arguing that it is,

indivisible from the photodocument's perceived technical inadequacies and *limitations* (which is very different from the assumption, in photographic naturalism, that the photographic document is the gateway to unmediated truth). Modernism in photography is born, therefore, at the point of modern photography's crisis and self-doubt, and not as a re-establishment of the photograph's would be transparency.

And it is from the standpoint of exploring the complexity of photographic practices within art that Wall (2007, p.136) furthermore contends that photography's modern reflexivity 'closely resembles (and even imitates) the frame of mind in which painting recognizes itself in the concept of its obsolescence.'

Juxtaposing this with Osborne's consideration of the ontology of the photographic image after the event of digitization becomes illuminating. Osborne (2010b, p.62) considers the implication of the concurrent digital and 'post-digitalization'¹¹⁹ paradigms for the changing conception of art, and, more fundamentally, argues beyond these distinctions, that the photographic is 'the dominant form of the image in general.' Photography as a pictorial medium is identified as a particular instance, by Osborne (2003, p.64), within the broader *transmedia condition* of the photographic in art and culture. This has to an extent been galvanized by the utilization of photography within early 1960s conceptual practices, minimalism, performance etc. and its increasingly 'non-aesthetic' approach, i.e. it is not necessarily engaging with the status of the image as part of a pictorial medium, it does not necessarily prioritize the visual and its associated techniques of making, nor is its function limited to the indexical-facticity of a document.

To this extent, the particular conceptual 'materialization' of photographic image-objects in e.g. *Rebus* and *Eyewash* presents a broader critique of the previously prevalent formalist modernism. Such approaches expose the inadequacy of the (meta-) criterion of art conceived in terms of *medium-specificity*, for such a categorization simply does not have the capacity to fully appreciate, or critically contextualize the subsequent disjunctive utilization of forms, situations, and environments of conceptual and *postconceptual* practices.

¹¹⁹ Philipsen (2013, p.2) argues that the digital paradigm's aesthetic concern is typically upon a technological focus that challenges institutional and disciplinary divisions, while the more recent paradigm of a post-digital approach is characterized by the prioritization of experience and use.

One might suggest that Osborne sets out his arguments about the photographic, beyond the prevalence of *technological determinism*, and against the technical focus of much new-media theorizations in which primacy is placed on *cultural analytics* and *data visualization*, such as found in Manovich's *postmedia aesthetics*, that is reminiscent of the problematic of *industrial visualization* in the Gilbreth films' referenced (Figure 76). Thus, moving beyond the impasse of historical disputes associated with documentary photography of truth, neutrality, manipulation etc., Osborne (2010b, p.64) contends that there is no fundamental distinction between the indexicality of the different forms of photographically generated image. He acknowledges, however, more generally that there is an amplified disjuncture between the moment of capture and the process of its reproduction. He considers the 'anxiety about the real' and 'loss' of indexicality as symptomatic of a deeper perspective of the intensified 'nature of the abstraction of social relations' associated, as an example, with the consequences of finance capital, increasingly divorced from the *real economy*.

While concerned with the status of the photographic image prior to widespread digitization, Rosler's (2004b, p.186) discussion of documentary practices and photographic truth in relation to art remains apposite. She succinctly posits that an appreciation of historically contested meaning and not 'transcendental verities, govern whether any particular form is seen as adequately revealing its meaning' and likewise disputes 'the possibility of a non-ideological aesthetic; any response to an image is inevitably rooted in social knowledge – specifically, in social understanding of cultural products.' This chimes with Roberts' (2009, p.286) contention that photography's comprehension must be underpinned as 'discursively constructed (and reconstructible) *pictures*'.

The pursuit of a more robust conceptual adequacy of the photographic (and of the commodity), in which social reality and objective truth cannot be bound to the photographic surface or its substrate (via various forms of literal positivism), but must instead contend with the way that reality's appearance itself can be an illusion (Lister, 2004). At one level one must consider the experience of the fictional but nevertheless 'real' imagery that the photographic presents, be it analog or digital. At another level, as Osborne (2005, p.16) argues, following Marx' analysis of the commodity-form, 'there is trick of the eye built into the very structure [...] It is an 'objective illusion' that remains even after it has been apprehended.'¹²⁰ And tangentially, but just as

¹²⁰ The sensuousness of (Marx') new materialism is not confined to the act of intuition and sense-perception or the sum of knowledge of an object, but the broader nexus of '*practical*, human-sensuous activity' (social, historical and techno-scientific expressions). This is significant for the antihumanist strain in Marx' materialist methodology in which subject-object relations are problematized and the ascription of the human essence is no longer an 'abstraction inherent in each single individual' but distributed across the network and flux of 'the *ensemble* of the social relations'.

important is how Marx addresses the capacity to change circumstances or to self-change, which is an inherent part of the transformative practice of human-sensuous activity, and ultimately turns on socio-material conditions. As Marx (2005, pp.1, Theses #2) writes, ‘the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question...’

Osborne goes on to focus not on the anxiety surrounding the status of the data file, but following Groys’ (2008, pp.83, 90) in ‘Art in the Age of Digitalization’ upon its emphasis on the proliferation of forms the digitized image-copy can take, such as, its projection on the screen, wall, objects, fog particulates, and within the monitor etc. This list also includes the heterogeneity of non-traditional art exhibition spaces, and particularly the ‘open fields of contemporary means of communication’, such as the internet, in which, it is argued there pervades a sense of ‘the impossibility of stabilizing the identity of the image’. Groys (pp.85, 91) goes on to shift the significance from digital images *per se* to the ‘original event’ of its ‘visualization’, such that ‘each presentation of the image becomes a *re-creation* of the image’ [my emphasis] and that ‘postdigital curatorial practice’ has a significant role to play in transforming the image (copy) into an original event. With its focus upon the implications of technical reproducibility and the image as copy, Osborne (2010b, p.66) argues that it is the ‘generic power of digitalization to *free itself from any particular medium* that, ultimately, distinguishes the digital image from its chemically produced predecessor.’ This is not, Osborne (p.67) continues,

a “dematerialization” of art (or photography) however – always a misunderstanding of art’s conceptual character – but a materially specific medium of generation of an in-principle-infinite field of visualizations (the data file.) If there is a meaningful site of “dematerialization” at stake here, it does not lie in the data file, nor in the conceptual dimension of the work (the originally postulated site of dematerialization) – which is always tied to specific materializations – but rather (ironically) in the image itself, insofar as the image is the name for the perceptual *abstraction* of a visual structure from its material form.

Breer's Conception of the Filmic Image in a Dynamic with Single-frame Aesthetics
intercut with the

Disjunctive Montage Temporality of Benjamin's Dialectical Image



Contemporary Considerations of the Image's Visualization Across Media

One might think here of Benjamin's (1999c, pp.463 [N3,1]) interruptive conception of historical time that is figured in the *dialectical image*; 'image is dialectics at a standstill' and 'the image [read] in the now of its recognizability'. Benjamin's emphasis upon a *qualitative* notion of time is fundamental to the experience of historical meaning that is made visible by the operations of the interruptive flash and the static, condensed temporality of the image. This is set in contrast to the *quantitative* measure of mechanical time, tied to the ideology of progress and continuity maintained by positivist historicism based upon, what Benjamin (1973b, p.252) describes as 'homogeneous, empty time.' In the leaps made possible by the montage structure of the *dialectical image*, new historical meaning becomes galvanized and recognizable from out of the immanent form and experiential crisis of modernity itself. As Osborne (Osborne & Charles, 2015, p.44) argues, the particular experience of historical meaning made available by the "static" temporality of the *dialectical image*, opens up new prospects in the moment of its disjuncture, which is allied by Benjamin to potentially radical change, and action. The shifting historical dynamics tied to a sense of social recognition is also innervated by new technical forms, and the technological relations of, say, film, which potentially become the 'technical organs of the collective' (Benjamin, 1999c, pp.631 [W7,4]).

It is in this broader context of the consideration of the importance of interruptive montage, and the *qualitative* notion of time (Beauvais, 2006, p.163) that it is of interest to consider Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.18) largely ignored contention that his cinematic collages be experienced within the domain of the image. This conceptualization presents various difficulties to the at once technologized and dematerialized status of the moving-image within art, and the effort to materialize (animated) film within the domain of art as a medium (that has largely been a craft-based technique).

The perspective of film grasped as an image, has no doubt stemmed in part from Breer's process of working out of the single frame in its various forms, such as, celluloid, index-cards, slides, and re-capturing the stages of a painting etc. as expressed by Breer's (Beauvais, 2006, p.157) recollection of the technically involved process he develops traversing painting, sculpture and film. Breer likewise explains in an interview with Mendelson (1981, p.2) that when he initially

started to ‘think of each frame as a still picture [...] it gave [him] the freedom to experiment’. Mendelson’s detailed scholarly and pedagogical study ‘Robert Breer: A Study of his Work in the Context of the Modernist Tradition’ makes the argument that Breer’s approach ‘incorporates the process of expanding beyond pictorial limits into the very process of expanding beyond cinematic conventions.’ Mendelson bases her own methodology primarily in a frame-by-frame analysis of Breer’s film-stills, using a Steinbeck editor, and locating the study in film-stills and the author’s sketches of each frame which, she argues, ‘provides the viewer a rigorous course in eye training, helping him to see more, to see faster.’

Mendelson, however, acknowledges the importance of ambiguity and tension in Breer’s films, which is exceeded by such an approach that ‘violates the fundamental nature of the intended viewing experience. For these are films whose impact depends on speed, leaving time for nothing but perception.’ Beyond repeating such an approach, my own resistance to a single-frame breakdown, after the ‘digital revolution’ is partly that this track is now open to viewers of Breer’s work, some of which can be found online. However, more importantly, as Mendelson herself acknowledges, it does not correspond to the surprising pleasures, anticipations and destabilizations of the time-based viewing experience.

One might add, furthermore, that it does not fully recognize the significance of Breer’s economical use of the index-card flipbook, prior to filming certain graphic segments, and how the action of thumbing through cards implies they have, to a great extent, always been conceived spatio-temporally. The complexity of Breer’s process is held between structuration and chance procedures and elements, such as, shuffling frames, in-camera effects, and moments that feel serendipitously captured in live-action, along with cuts-on-motion. Such a frame-by-frame breakdown risks diminishing the encounter and the filmwork’s own dynamic emergence. Because of the degree of control afforded by animation, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.42) insists on operating at a ‘threshold’ that creates ‘opportunities’, in other words to invite into all of his works elements of the ‘unforeseen’, and the possibility ‘to amaze’ himself.

Returning to the challenge of the way in which Breer’s (Macdonald, 1992, p.31) work tightly intertwines the interruptive aspects of process and the artist’s recognition of its significance, risks in Mendelson’s framework, being reduced to ‘fossilized evidence that some action had taken place previously’ as Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.31) has warned about expressionistic action painting. But as Breer foregrounds in many works, the im/possibility of the perception of each frame within the mechanics of film is not held literally but as part of the work’s internal contradiction. *Eyewash* becomes significant because it exemplifies this problematic by making the question of visibility and its liminal bounds central not only to the film’s concept, but also to his

conception of the filmic image. It moves invariably beyond the sense often celebrated, in which the impact of Breer's films is located primarily in their 'speed' or as 'pure perception'.

Mendelson (1981, p.33) argues, however, on this point that Breer's work 'attempted to erode one's awareness of the actual time of the viewing experience, creating in its stead a feeling of continuous presentness.' In contradistinction to this, it is worth returning to Breer's (Levine, 1973, p.6) account of *Form Phases IV* and later primarily graphic animations, 'my films are basically abstract, and that being the case, the structure is what is left when you take everything else out'. Breer continues with the allusion to this conceptualization of his film as an image in terms of 'the practice of synthesizing the film' which is generated between the dynamic of 'continuity and discontinuity', rhythms, and the structuration of the 'space-image' in relation to time, in which he argues 'that's all a question of painting discipline.' This contrasts, as discussed with Schwitters' Merz collages in which a particular moment of the image's development is seized in time. In Breer's filmic-image, time is compacted within the spatial dynamics of its form, yet simultaneously a *qualitative* experience of time is also sought that resists the invariably sequential nature of film. As Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) himself suggests, 'My own approach is that of a painter – that is, I try to present the total image right away, and the images following are merely other aspects of and equivalent to the first and final image.'

Apparent here is the degree to which Breer's process is conversant with and utilizes the sense that animation with its single-frame graphic platform (related to pre-cinematic modes including index-cards, moving paintings etc.), audio-track, and its photographic aspect presents a form of the analogue *convergence of media*. Breer's approach could even be taken to encroach on Osborne's (2010b, p.66) distinction of photography, which does not lie in its difference between analog and digital but in its 'multiplication of possible visualization/projection [...] deriving from the generic power to free itself from any particular medium'. In a sense, such a distinction is conceptually presaged by Breer's single-frame approach to the moving-image that is, for instance, an exploration of the anti-kinetic kineticism operating across various mediums including painting and sculpture. It is worth clarifying how, for Osborne (2013, p.124), the problematic distinctions between the analogue and *digital convergence of media*, as well as Groys' (2008, pp.85, 91) emphasis on 'visualization', such that 'each presentation of the image becomes a re-creation' is later more concisely refigured through an understanding that the photographic is 'distributed *across* the sites of its process'.

The implications of such a re-creation is epitomised by Breer's film *Recreation*, 1956 in relation to its critique of the discipline of animation. In *Eyewash*, the significance of Osborne's distributive notion of the photographic gives a degree of credence to Breer's visualization of film in terms of

an image. The transcategorical dynamics afforded by Breer's single-frame approach is distributed across pre-cinematic forms, and film, with its divergent use of photography and in relation to re-filmed graphic and painterly abstraction. Osborne continues by arguing that asking where the site of the photograph resides, (negative, digital file, print, screen), presents a misguided line of inquiry. This could also be considered in terms of the apparatus and processes of film. The *distributive unity* of the photographic, as Osborne (2013, p.124) suggests, 'permeates as an image, de-realized (spectral), albeit in a peculiar ontological state of dependency upon the processes that it transcends, in each of its different technological forms.' This, furthermore, has an 'ontological affinity' with the conceptual aspect of art, 'for there is no fixed place of either 'the' photograph, or the work of art.'

By refiguring the emphasis between technical realization and conceptual de- and re-materialization in terms of a work's mediation of film, one can likewise return to the notion of the 'materialized image', which Krauss attributes to Rauschenberg's approach to the painting-collages like *Rebus*, and which is conceptually underpinned by the image-object's equivocal status in the painting, which never fully relinquishes its relation to the real, and remains an instance of it. It is clear that Breer's concern with cinematic collage is, likewise, taken up with such a problematic, yet this is invariably complicated by both the 'unity and seriality' (Osborne, 2002, p.24) of the industrialized form of film itself. In a discussion of the exploration of time and seriality within works more clearly identified with minimalism and mid-1960s Conceptual Art, Osborne (2002, p.24) discusses how 'seriality appears as part of the everyday experience of images as commodities, in a world in which time itself has divided into an infinite series of (salable) units of equal measure.'



Figure 76. Gilbreth, *Micro-motion films for industrial management and training purposes*, 1910-24, (2 stills).

One brief example from the beginning of the 20th Century, which shows an early use of the relation between the photographic positivism, and the spatio-temporal breakdown of the image

in relation to the technical instrumentalization of perception and action as explored by industrial Modernism, is found in the Gilbreth micro-motion films. The Gilbreths were advocates of *scientific management* or Taylorism, but instead of focusing primarily upon the speed of productivity, they employed various work measurement techniques to focus on efficiency through the rationalized management and standardization of tasks and processes. The photographic cyclegraph still (Figure 76, right) is of a three-dimensional light trace of the action of a factory worker assembling parts, which is subsequently analysed in wire facsimiles. Each image-scenario is spatially divided and objectified by 'anthropometric' grids taken directly from Muybridge's chronophotography and the ethnographic photography of the times. The grids are often distorted, by the cameras angle, which is very apparent in the video clip of the typist, Owen (Figure 76, left), and both the relative scale of the grid and the timings of the chronometer, are instruments that have little genuine capability for aiding precision but are imparted with the surrounding rhetoric of objective scientificity. Despite the purported claims of these studies of kinetic machinery and bodily action, as Curtis (2009, p.96) argues in *Images of Efficiency*, they have little to do with any kind of sustained expert analysis, but are rather self-promotional films for the managerial hierarchy and part of the process of industrialized *visualization*, a response to the utopically limited question of what efficiency looks like, and provides an imagined solution.

In response to such disputes, Roberts' critique of photography is at pains to defend the particular case of photography's indexicality from disillusionment rooted in this perceived crisis of (digital) photography's relation to truth in terms of realism. As Roberts (2009, p.286) asserts, 'in the rush to condemn documentary practice as unreflective, the classical ontology of photography – its unique indexicality as a medium – has been made to appear feeble or irrelevant, weakening the primary content of this indexicality: photography's privileged discursive relationship to the historical event.' It is this *(post)conceptual*, but largely nominal relation (e.g. in which significance is imparted primarily to the artist's choice of working with particular personal or *mediatic* imagery) that contemporary painting is reasserted as it faces the inundation of photographic imagery and its networks chronicling our times. Borchardt-Hume (2011) states of one such artist utilizing topical images from the news, or circulating within social-media etc., 'he translates particular images into paintings and awards them the aura of painting thereby giving this image a particular value.'

Breer's eclectic approach to the materialization of the everyday image-objects in his films and his particular disjunctive montage-like approach to the single-frame, while cognizant of the industrialized basis of film, and the quantification of time which is made explicit within capitalist

industrialization, does not, in its critique, present a sense of the nihilism underpinning the earlier modernist experience of urban fragmentation, nor on the other hand does he present the altogether 'indifferent' minimalist serialization in a refiguration of commercial experience. The focus on the single-frame and use of index-cards Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.47) argues, was part of 'analyzing the construction of film. That's part of my idea about concreteness and exposing the materials of film itself...' And while Breer's animation is haunted by the historically industrialized dissection of time and its imaging, the strong 'frame by frame synthesis' (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.46) of the filmic form and the degree of indeterminacy sought in the image-content suggests, rather, an overt and poetic rejection of such operations.

While Breer initially utilizes the discourse of painting, his approach could likewise be seen to question the prevailing legitimacy of painting after the event of the photographic and moving-image, yet conversely his tactics were boldly posed in a period in which the legitimacy of film within the sphere of Art itself was not secure, and experimental animation was consistently marginalized by the larger domain of narrative live-action film. The problematic raised in Breer's works, such as *Eyewash*, with its pluralistic, and egalitarian mediation of different modes of image-making has an interesting resonance with the neo-avant-garde juncture, and can be juxtaposed to current debates that are part of the latest shift from the previously held anxiety over the legitimacy of painting after the event of the intensified photographic condition, in which, as suggested below, the question of painting becomes raised *postconceptually*.¹²¹

In a consideration of *postconceptual* painting, Osborne (2009a, p.96) argues that it reflexively turns on the 'historical constitution and destruction of the concept of painting' over its auratic continuation as craft-based medium. Such a context is characterized by the current explosive multiplicity of modes and forms, along with works that are, as Osborne (2006, p.14) argues, 'suspended between the perspectives of the historical- and neo-avant-gardes – [which] continue into the immediate present.' 'Nonetheless', Osborne continues, 'international art-institutions now rarely present recent work in terms of the historical consciousness of the avant-garde.' This was less unusual within the framework of the postwar generation of the late 1940s-1950s, as is made apparent in the neo-avant-garde work of this generation, including, as I have argued Breer. Roberts (2010, p.720) has likewise argued, 'there is a clear sense in which most contemporary art *is* precisely neo-avant-gardist in these terms, insofar as it rearticulates the break with the historic avant-garde with the painterly modernist object in favour of a definition of art as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, multifarious postobject work; an ensemble of techniques and

¹²¹ In earlier theorizations, aspects of the current situation are critically described by Osborne (2002, p.17) in a survey of conceptual art: 'Since the beginning of the 1990s, the international art world has been dominated by a formally diverse array of 'postconceptual' objects and practices that combine the freedom of means characteristic of the art of the late 1960s and early 1970s with the market orientation and antipathy to theory that distinguished the reaction against that art during the 1980s.'

practices that at all time exceeds the bounded aesthetic limits of the discrete modernist object.’

Situating the Non-Cubist Montage of Breer's Eyewash

It must be emphasize that Breer's mediation with open, non-elitist ambitions for art, and unpretentious experimental aesthetic belies its sustained interrogations into form and brazenly risked failure. Such an approach has garnered the criticism that it lacks, on the one hand, 'visionary coherence' as Sitney (2002, p.277) once suggested, and on the other hand, has never fully relinquished a craft-based engagement exploring its aesthetic limits and the eye-popping potential of the image, at once a form of playful destruction and salve. Changing the perspective on *Eyewash*, it can be argued to engage in a critique of dominant cinema and more broadly of the modes of looking that its multidisciplinary construction affords. In this manner, its conceptual refiguring of geometric modernist tropes is juxtaposed with impulses of expressive abstraction that become visible as a form of intervention.

The active forces of art's history, which can be gleaned within the approach and forms of *Eyewash*, also openly take in the world beyond art. Within a Benjaminian framework, one might argue that the past is transformatively unleashed, or, in other words, the vital, contemporaneous forces of the past inflect on aspects of the immediately obsolescent present and form a disjuncture, an opening of the question of the conditions of its making. It is with this probing sensibility of thresholds and conventions that Breer's works continue to exert a contemporary valence.

Eyewash contains a number of puns, starting with the title, which can be a cleansing solution for the eyes, but in a reversal of meaning can also refer to actions (or movements), which conceal the particulars of a situation. The synonyms and meaning of the term, furthermore, tip over into Breer's courting of 'non-sense', and his attention paid to 'rubbish', that here can also be taken to express Breer's keen sense of the overlooked and discarded materials incorporated by so-called junk-art, and film assemblages. One of the first shots of the film is a kind of organic or even biological image of what could be the interior of an eye, but is the darkened jostle of running water whose highlights glint and catch the light, and into which one can just make out frames of tinted card, or 'rubbish' being thrown into the veins of its stream, methodically like the opening of the camera's shutter. Macdonald (1992, p.28) comments that its 'highly edited, gestural style with obvious personal imagery, [was] a method exploited so effectively by Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas.'

But Breer's gestural form, it can be argued, stems out of a different motivation, which while playing with ambiguity, is still highly focused upon the interrogation of vision and is not suggestive of the romantic visionary. Breer's use of potentially romantic images of a child and an infant may have the aura of highly personal connotations but tends to perform a sharper double function in terms of setting up aspects of vision, such as acquiring the capacity to see, which is built out of tactile and spatial relations, repetition, wonder, and familiarity (Figure 80). In this way it no doubt prefigures Brakhage, but is distinct in sentiment from Brakhage's (2001b, p.12) question, 'How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green"?'. Rather, the dynamic of a child rolling a ball to the camera-spectator (Figure 81) gains a cunning sense of acuity when intercut with myopic and heavily blurred and formless sequences. Although Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.38) is responding to a question about the purported souvenir quality and personal memorabilia contained in another film, *Fist Fight* 1964 his account can be taken more broadly as characteristic of his measured approach to materials, 'I had seen some of the personal films people had made, and I decided I could deal with my own personal material unsentimentally, that it would be a challenge to use family snapshots and items from my own life and yet to keep the film cold and public – to have it both ways, in other words.' This will be touched on further with the film *Bang!*, 1986 (Chapter 6).



Figure 77. Brakhage, *Commingle Containers*, 1997, (3min, 16mm).

In the same vein, one might think, rather, of Brakhage's much later, singularly sustained focus in *Commingle Containers*.¹²² The darkly glistening flow of water is contrasted to the elegantly changing biomorphic abstractions of light refracting in water, droplets picked out and gently contorted by modifications to

the lens. Overtures to the film often focus less on its striking defamiliarization of the common element, and more in terms of the work as an extension of the artist, and Brakhage's endeavour to make sense of fragility in the face of life's uncontrollable and overpowering forces, in view of his own concurrently ailing health – magnifying the nearness of his own transience.¹²³ Such associations intensify the perspective in which Brakhage's work is generally framed, as Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.51) has also reiterated, '... it's the tremendous scope of possibilities of cinema. Brakhage's view of... encompassing the universe, you know... I have to quote you from

¹²² Image Source: (Brakhage, 2008)

¹²³ The chemical dyes of his paint-on-film process may also have contributed to his bladder cancer the NYTimes obituary states. (Scott, 2003, p.3)

your lecture (to Sitney)... but the romantic ideal, the cosmic view... of incorporating the whole world in the film. Whether you use the word “world”, “universe”, the symbol like that...’

In Breer’s film *Eyewash* the blurred traces of movement and the surface textures of long exposures are contrasted with interruptive stasis, the illusion of depth cut suddenly by an interval of flatness, the screen itself no longer subsidiary. Despite the humourous intimation of the limp red work-glove made apparent in Figure 73 by the absence of kinesis, during the reception of the film, one would be hard pressed to register this constructed image. Rather Breer’s works use the mechanics of film itself to actively challenge and conceptually destabilize the priority placed upon vision, with individual frames remaining below the threshold of ‘visibility’ or intelligibility within the filmic image.

By the same token, the objects and their engagement take on an unsettling multivalence, and are, as mentioned, described as ‘personality-less’ for Breer (Moore, 1980, p.4) in construction and at the point of editing. They are, to an extent, denaturalized in the process of extrication from a habitual perspective in which the movement of cinematic process becomes paramount and gives rise to a perceptible ‘feeling’. Just as the subjective relations within Breer’s (Moore, 1980, p.9) cinema are abstracted, he proffers physical analogies, ‘Things in strenuous opposition to each other give off sparks. I like violent energy coming off the screen. I think it’s temperamental. It’s how I played football. I want impact. It’s a rare moment when I get lyrical, where things stretch out, quietly - and I like the feeling around that to be a kind of intake of air.’

Despite Breer’s own recourse to populist language, Sitney (2002, p.277) portrays his process as ‘recalling the strategies’ of the cubist cinema e.g. Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924, (Chapter 4). Yet Sitney (1973, p.31) also compares *Eyewash* to previous works by Breer arguing that this work was ‘more ambitious in his attempt at a fusion of animated and actual scenes, but he was not more successful.’ While the sensuality of *Ballet Mécanique* lies ostensibly in the modern, constructivist exploration of cinematic motion, which presents, as I suggested earlier, an exalted cubist dance of a new machinic realism, Breer’s approach in *Eyewash*, by contrast, is tied to a critique of vision and visibility in terms of an open, neo-avant-garde (post)aesthetic framework of debates surrounding graphic and figurative abstraction, as well as, a deliberate (in refutation of Sitney) non-‘cohesive’ and dis-‘passionate’ multivalence afforded by the mediation of image-objects that would seem yet to be fully appreciated in the work.

In this way the openly candid and anarchic eclecticism captured within the motto of Breer’s (Beauvais, 2006, p.169) approach: ‘everything goes – not anything!’ is apposite. This points to a lineage in montage that is distinct from so-called *cinematic cubism* and one might evoke the non-

cubist live-action and animation films of caricaturist and early 1900s filmmaker Émile Cohl. Sitney (1973, p.35) compares Cohl's approach to the 'radical modernism' of Richter, Léger, Duchamp, Eggeling, and portrays his films as a 'pre-modernist' cinema arguing that 'the techniques [Cohl] *invented* were used in the service of a naïve fascination with metamorphosis' [...] 'a whimsical fascination with the illusions of movement and transformation that motivated Cohl'. However, after seeing Cohl's films, there is a sense that its pleasures are underpinned by the particular principles of his non-cubist approach to montage as will be stressed below after a brief consideration of the metamorphosis of his animated line-drawings. This strain of Cohl's work is typically alluded to in connection with Breer as in the interview with Macdonald (1992, p.17), and which is also discussed by Mendelson (1981, p.51) in 'Breer's Exploration of Cinematic Line'.

First it should be briefly noted that Cohl's *Fantasmagorie*, 1908, is one of the earliest traditionally hand-drawn animation films, the mechanism of which he is said to have deduced himself probably after seeing stop-motion in the films of Stuart Blackton, and the trick-effects in the films of George Méliès.¹²⁴ *Fantasmagorie* is still celebrated for the charm of the economy of its line, and the vivacious candour of its spontaneity in which everyday elements and occurrences become contorted into the oneiric through the humourous play of nonstop metamorphosis - of one form into another, and the appearance and disappearance of others. This has been considered suggestive of stream-of-consciousness, free-association, the distortions within dream-work, (that Freud identified) such as condensation, displacement, and symbolism, and also anticipates the automatic writing and drawing of Dada and Surrealism. As Crafton (1990, p.170) cites in his comprehensive biography of Cohl, one commentator at the time reviewing another



Cohl film and trying to frame it, noted prosaically that, 'It cannot be described, but a game common many years ago known as "geometry at play" comes nearest to it. It is funny and in such an unexpected and unique way that it wins rounds of applause whenever it is shown.'¹²⁵

Figure 78. Cohl, *Fantasmagorie*, 1908, (1.20min, 16mm).

The frustration depicted in this sequence (Figure 78) of a theatregoer whose view is obstructed

¹²⁴ Image Source: (Cohl, 2006)

¹²⁵ *Un Drame Chez les Fantoche*s, (A Love Affair in Toyland), Moving Picture World, December 19, 1908

and turns his gaze toward the film-spectator in exasperation is brilliantly economical with its humour, and enduringly recognizable. It is moments such as this, which sustain its more anarchic departures, and its explosive ‘fantastical’ series of culminations over a more conventional plot-driven narrativity (in the comic-strip, caricature, and film). The films refusal of the imposition of a clearly ‘rational order or unified structure’ is developed as part of the Incoherent movement of artists and journalists gathering between 1883-1891 in Paris, as Crafton (1990, pp.257-58) elucidates. He continues that while the Incoherents share a lineage with the more widely known Symbolist movement, they were set on glee, verging upon escapism, against the morbid seriousness of the Symbolist’s dictum ‘Il nous faut mourir’ (We must all die) they proclaim instead, ‘Frères, il nous faut rire’ (Brothers, we need to laugh).

Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.17) discusses how Burch (theorist and filmmaker) took him to see Cohl’s work for the first time after a viewing of Breer’s own ticklingly sparse line-drawing film *A Man and his Dog Out for Air*, 1957. It is perhaps in their absurdist sensibility, sense of timing and the confounding of spatial dynamics within the frame, as well as the apparent shattering of traditional cinematic continuity, and a transitory immersion into the semblance of what Breer (Coté, 1962, p.19) describes as ‘formlessness’, that affinities between Breer and Cohl can most easily be gleaned. In his monograph on Breer, Curtis (1983, p.5) also asserts that he extends the tradition of metamorphosis that stretches back to Cohl ‘by exploring subconscious associations of ideas and objects[...]. And by prolonging the imaginary states between identities, he has investigated the boundaries between abstraction and figuration.’ This is patently central to the pleasure of Breer’s work within the realm of animation, but it is also of relevance when considering the moving-image within contemporary art.

It is in many ways telling that more explicit references to Cohl surface in Breer’s later work, such as in *LMNO*, 1978, when he creates a Cohl-like character, in the form of a stick figure of a French Policeman. This form of appropriation, as suggested, speaks to broad changes in artworld reception, not only with the inclusion of pop but also increasingly the endeavour to take ‘seriously’ not only film (avant-garde, experimental et al.) but also ultimately animation, whose distinctive discourses Breer has uniquely triangulated through his practice as an artist in the moving-image.

Affinities with Cohl can also be seen to be rooted in the particularities of technique that arise from the inventive process of experimentation and the necessities of becoming not only self-taught, but also of working independently. Associated with this is the desire to reveal the cinematic and animation tricks and gags, and to invite the audience in on the joke revealing its construction and artifice. With the neo-avant-garde artist’s resistance to the subsequent privilege

placed upon influences as wholly determinate alignments, or more significantly for the erection of canons, Breer's (Macdonald, 1992, p.17) response is also decidedly practical,

I did what I've always done. I skipped cinema history and started at the beginning. I used very peculiar techniques because I didn't know how to animate. That I would do what Cohl did makes sense. You know Santayana's line about how, if you don't know something, you're doomed to relive it. I'm still working out things people worked out years ago. [...] I think it makes sense to do research... But I always associated it with the academy and with institutions and didn't want any part of it. I remember seeing a book, *How to Animate*, put out by Kodak I think. The kind of cartooning it was pushing turned me off so badly that I didn't want to learn anything they had to offer. I was afraid it would contaminate me.

It might be gleaned that such discussions on improvisation, spontaneity, innovation can be set in contrast to the Expressionism of the late 1940-50s. These elements associated with multivalency and, to a degree, with freedom itself are situated prominently in a complicated relation to perception and conventions. Breer's approach is furthermore set in a dynamic with the problematics of structure, the trajectory of aesthetic logic, as well as with the process of translation across different mediums and in a diversity of techniques that come to comprise the centrality of a practical discipline within the mechanics of a single-frame framework.

Returning to *Eyewash*, it was not until I saw Cohl's rarely seen film, *Les Métamorphosis Comiques*, 1912, (Figure 79) during a recent exhibition of Jean Desmet's 'Dream Factory: The Adventurous Years of Film' (1907-1916) that I was struck more forcefully by the correspondences in its attitude to a non-cubist approach to montage.¹²⁶ Breer makes reference to Cohl in various discussions, but pertinent here is the interview with Moore (1980, p.10) regarding Cohl's cinematic and associative scaffolding that allows for the 'non sequitur' and Breer's later desire to demolish even the edifice of such security creating a disjuncture between coherence and unintelligibility in which the 'burden is on the viewer'.

Such moments are evoked in *Les Métamorphosis Comiques* where Cohl humorously conveys connections between the photographic image, primarily via the return to studio portraiture, while diverting its scenario set-ups with unremitting twists, and by intercutting its form with the mischievous metamorphosis of his famous stream-of-consciousness graphic morphing line. The space of the portrait studio, and the associated tropes of the still life, the souvenir, memento mori, along with the film's excursions and digressions are dissected and exceeded in various ways

¹²⁶ EYE Film Museum, Amsterdam, December 2014 - March 15, 2015. The film is part of Desmet's collection in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register.

by Cohl's repetition and deviations in film. The 'portraits', however, include the focus upon such objects as worker's boot, a watering-can, a top-hat, as well as staged situations that become absurd school-boy pranks, with direct-address to the onside viewer, who becomes party to the tongue wagging and the 'cock a snook' five-fingered salute to higher-ups with ear-boxing repercussions. In it, the traditional and high-fashion of the bourgeoisie become outlandish, an official disconcertingly gurns, a female caregiver and a young boy share a light and a smoke-blazing cigarette, another woman in bohemian attire meditates on the future, and two society women become unctuous over an invitation.



Figure 79. Cohl, *Les Métamorphosis Comiques*, 1912, (4:20min, 16mm, 8 stills).

The film presents at various points a collection of sketchily traced postcards. One cannot help but feel a relation between this and the neo-dadaist attitude in Breer's use of the rotoscope in his later 1970s films, which Burford (1999, p.90) has categorized as 'rotoscope films' and which includes *Bang!*, 1986 (Chapter 6). The rotoscopic hand-drawn copy of live-action movement was utilized by the cartoon industry to recreate seamless life-like gestures for cartoon characters. In Cohl's film the invariably impressive trace of photographic realism in the literal, and even mechanical mimesis of the line-drawn copy is held in contrast with the loose imaginatively 'direct' metamorphosis of the line's form in other segments and creates an uncanny, comic relationship. These separate gestures are beguilingly conflated in Breer's animated transformations between objects whose form is itself breaking down, and its associated natural movement whose flow is at once recognizable and continually interrupted with wonderfully disjunctive flourishes.

The collection in *Les Métamorphosis Comiques* expands further with real photographs of landscapes and 'live' animals, a camel, bulls, a live-action shot of a pocket monkey in the palm of a hand eating nuts, and even a pair of 'cute cats' (with interesting resonances to the prevalence today of online 'lolcats' imagery and the subversion of 'low-value' content by activists on social platforms). The imagery is also suffused with a lifeless array of taxidermy animals, a lizard or small alligator, beetle, seahorse etc, interspersed with other curiosities, and collected toys that

become ‘animated’, such as a mechanically waddling doll with long, blond, curly locks. Lastly, in another trajectory, one might cite a vase prominently displayed of ‘proto-geometric’ abstraction that looks modern, but has associations with other places, and perhaps pre-historic times, or ‘primitive cultures’. All of these differing types of objects and species of imagery are honed to surprise or ridicule bourgeois morality while becoming starting points for the subtle and imaginative play of graphic forms, amorphous characters and shapes that bound about the frame as a flat-surface, then recede to give the graphic illusion of distance.

It is as if Breer has matched the disposition of such an uncannily distinctive film but makes it, in *Eyewash*, a radically frenetic collision of filmic gestures, the contrapuntal cuts on motion and the emergence of evocative imagery marked in turn by a carnivalesque concern with immediacy in bewilderment and disorientation. This has the effect of honing one’s attention upon the haptic sensuality of vision, in which the eye seizes upon the differential colour-textures of objects and of movements, along with references, say, to the sketchily drawn arch of a rainbow, and the prismatic effects of bold colors in flicker. The latter effect along with the flicker of white light is



used to undercut the solidity of the photographic and graphic images. *Eyewash* also uses cut-out shapes and mats that shift between the graphic abstraction of a shape to unexpectedly conjuring the sense of peering through a restricted field, such as a view-finder, spy- or peep-hole, in which the surface is inverted, giving way to a depth.

Figure 80. Breer, *Eyewash*.

These differential intensities are, furthermore, fleeting, and their organizing principle and connections tend to remain always on the cusp of disclosure, yet always abruptly superseded. A graphic abstraction of a slender white arch against black, for instance, becomes a wagging finger-glove of roughly-cut white card whose edges are indistinct and give a sense of its ‘live-action’ hand-manipulation under the camera. It also becomes reminiscent of the illusion of stasis of the rapidly spinning viewing slits of the zoetrope which gives way, in turn, to the double-exposure ‘depth’ and potential to contain an image beyond or below. This is furthermore negated or complicated by reference to another topography with the wiggling hand-painted lines, and washes of color on what is likely to be the celluloid’s surface. (Figure 75, 64)

In *Eyewash*, the sensible experience of many of these everyday things is determined not only by

their gesture, but also through their state of animated inbetweenness and the vacillating suspension of meaning itself. A strong sense of contingency is harnessed in the often dramatic tonal shifts and quality of motion between Breer's rapid stop-frame animation, followed by the ironic communication of a flat empty glove on a table, non-haptically pushing slowly against the torn white fabric of a painter's rag whose axis is reoriented when it then appears to slip vertically down, as if by the slow pull of gravity, just beyond reach.

And to draw upon Massumi (2002, pp.158, 134-5) in *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* Breer's *Eyewash* can be described as creating an 'inter-sense fusion' whereby the tactile embedded in visuality, and the empirical in the virtual become a palpable part of the process of muscle memory, repetitive practice, anticipation (e.g. of action in Breer's use of timing, the recoil or pause before the springing forth of a stream of imagery) and intuition itself. These might all be considered as aspects of the movements between the world and imagination (rooted in resourcefulness, and ingenuity), sensation and emotion, which Massumi distinguishes as a body's capacity for 'thinking feeling'. Massumi's characterization of 'the analogue process' is evocative not only in relation to Breer's creative process, but also in relation to the technological translation which his work foregrounds. Massumi (2002, p.135) continues that it is,

a continuously variable impulse or momentum that can cross from one qualitatively different medium into another. Like electricity into sound waves. Or heat into pain. Or light waves into vision. Or vision into imagination. Or noise in the ear into music in the heart. *Or outside coming in.* Variable continuity, across the qualitatively different: continuity of transformation.

As part of the endeavor to reconsider Breer's work in the context of reframing the overstated division between the analogue and digital, one might point to the depth of *experience* acquired through Breer's analogue process, to transform the discrete, discontinuous values and the seriality of frame by frame operations, which are then refigured by the mechanics and synthesis (total impression) of the collaged film-form. This touches on the question of the transformation of the subject by the image it presents both to and of experience via its particular technological opening. Perhaps acute for the animated form, is the potential resonance of affect tied to the quality of movement and its character in motion, and through which much of its singular intensity is achieved.

This *intensity* springs from the fleeting emotional and subjective effects that are in a feedback loop that is *then* qualified, to discern just how the object or situation had become motivated, while also keeping open, as Breer strives to do, the volitant lines which flow through memory. One may even be touched, by a peripheral gesture to all this *commotion*, when in the unexpected moment,

formal constraints unfetter, and the ‘anarchy of experience’ is summoned, to paraphrase Colebrook (2002, p.46). Such is the intuitive and instantaneous assessment that is *emotion*, to be moved, at once in, out, and beside oneself.



Figure 81. Breer, *Eyewash*.

However, it is only with the capacity to view such fast-paced films multiple times that the spectator can begin to interrogate its strong undercurrents, secured not by subjectively romantic leaps, but the obscured processual associations of the logic of its construction, that underpin and hold, often tacitly, the

filmic-image together. Breer (Levine, 1973, p.15) is asked about a particular scene which in the rapidity of the image, and in the manifold directions in which the images push and pull, in and against the struggle for cohesion, may in fact go unnoticed; ‘the fellow sawing wood, that got me the first time. It seemed, really it was an incongruous shot that was included there...’

(Figure 74, right, and discussed on p.177)

Breer however, gives very little away about prioritizing content or meaning, and rather maintains a certain equivalence to the different forms of imagery, and to reiterate, he argues that the film ‘ought to give the essence of itself the first viewing. Things like that happen all through the film. I don’t count on them being seen, I don’t count on them as that important, but it was important that I did it myself, that I know it was in there, that’s all.’ One might consider, as another example, the initially unexpected and just as fleeting interjection of a live-action sequence of an elderly couple walking in step, arm-in-arm, away from the camera. It not only presents a contrast in movement with the child’s ball rolling toward the viewer, but it becomes abruptly evident, if grasped at all, that it is a poignant movement in itself, as one of the pair, in all likelihood, has a



form of visual impairment. The old gent casually clutches with both hands a white cane, resting parallel across his back, as it has become unnecessary within this guiding embrace.

Figure 82. Breer, *Eyewash*.

Similarly, there is something in the evolution

and mixed textural imagery in *Eyewash* that is strangely akin to the more confounding moments within the child's game of guessing what's in the paper-bag or feel-box. But the processes of *Eyewash* can also be considered as part of a critique of embodiment of the lifeworld of a subject-in-process, in terms of a concise self-reflexive engagement that is all the same immersed in the dazzling perplexity of play in its relatedness-to-the-world, and to the *technics* of image and moving-image construction.

While *Eyewash* is primarily experienced at this level it opens with a more representational gesture. The title is located on an elliptical and roughly hewn cut-out shape, this card is sliced further, becoming nonchalantly reminiscent of the eye slashing scene from Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*. By the end of the film the metaphorical eye and inscribed title are inverted, thrown back out and up into the space of the viewer as if to suggest by this movement that the form of the filmic-image caught, (in view of its abstraction, and the liminal nature of much of the imagery due to its pace) is not passively accrued in the mind's eye of the viewer. To borrow from Barthes, authorship and here, to an extent, spectatorship is refigured as actively generated through the process of the film's construction and reception rather than priority placed in an a-priori designation of appropriate meaning, with clearly proscribed boundaries bolstering the impression that the resultant work has an inevitability to it or is a closed system.

CHAPTER 6

Bang!

Breer's film-works are presented in this thesis as undergoing historical, technological change with the translation of the prevailing discourses of art into the medium of film and its playful disassembly through the nascent lens of kinetics. In the film *Bang!*, 1986, Breer indexes technological shifts and foregrounds the *intermedia* condition of film, imaging the divergent (abstract) texture of various mediums, such as, television and video recaptured within film, and expanding live-action by the technique of *rotoscoping* (re-traced live-action).



Figure 83. Breer, *Bang!*, 1986, (10.17min, 16mm, 2 stills).

As Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.2) states of the shift from the increasingly ossified discourse of geometric abstraction in the 1950s, that the move towards an expanded sense of (cinematic) kinetics was a 'way out of the absolutism against both figuration and gestural art'. Furthermore, Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.8) suggests of these dynamics that 'it was a turning point for me and I guess I went through the throes that Kandinsky went through in 1913; it became a revelation that abstraction was possible.' (e.g. the Blue Rider period: 1911-1914)

The inclusion and centrality of diverse impulses within Breer's practice, since the 1950s has correspondences with the contemporaneous problematics raised by, say, Tinguely's meta-machines, or Rauschenberg's combine paintings, and is redolent of the pre-pop enterprise of drawing together art and life into its process in a way that more brazenly courts its own prospective transience while continuing to confront the enduring values of high art. Breer's process, for instance, can be distinguished from the 'cultural anthropology' of Pop-painters which takes shelter in the privileged status of a traditional medium that tends towards, what O'Doherty (1973, p.195) calls 'a classicizing of process,' as in, for instance, Lichtenstein's

brushstroke series. Although conversely, Lichtenstein's process of meticulous reproduction can also be construed as a subtle conceptual and 'anti-artistic' subversion of the modern tradition that does not radically relinquish the privileged status of painting. Rauschenberg's method with its provisional disruption of art's hierarchies and boundaries, however, undoubtedly has resonance when considering Breer's animated films particularly with later works such as *Bang!* for the sprawling 'open situation' it endeavours to achieve within its non-cubist approach to collage. O'Doherty (1973, pp.201, 203-204) identifies this as the dissociative principles and *process thinking* of the 'vernacular glance' which also draws on conventions of looking from the museum to sports spectatorship, to movie-going, that is also evident in his performance events harnessing new technology e.g. Rauschenberg's *Linoleum*, 1966, (Figure 8), and *Open Score*, 1966.

Many aspects of Breer's endeavours, for example, in the film *Bang!* are part of a critical reflection not only of the *illusory* aspects of dominant cinema, but also denote material differences in the dynamics of home-movie and mass-media spectatorship (whose separation was, in the 1980s, being recalibrated).¹²⁷ Breer's wide-ranging approach features an array of kinetic and optic devices rooted in popular and superseded entertainments, along with 'found-objects' including text evocative of comics, and derived from print-media. This can be extended to the modern concern of how the urban sphere itself is pervaded by mass-media, montaged and intercut by advertising images, the textuality of electric and neon-signs, billboards, graffiti etc. The questions associated with the confrontational focus of the historical avant-gardes and modernist *negation* of traditional hierarchies within art are taken up in a way that 'meaning' within perception and the social imaginary is not denied, but driven into the heart of its often dissociative operations at the juncture of form, aesthetics, high and popular culture.

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The exploratory approach of the film *Bang!* 1986, for instance, cannot be rooted in traditional (transcendental) idealism or the perspective of a teleological or totalizing presence that has later become associated with high modernist abstraction and abstract expressionism, but is rather situated by the poignant irony in the contingency and historicity of the autobiographical. It is this critical and lyrical entanglement with the abstraction and the machinery of vision, sustained throughout Breer's film practice, that has resonance with aspects of critical postmodernism. Johnston (1990, p.91) for instance, elucidates this distinction by arguing that modernist works operate at the level of the *symbol*, with 'private languages'.

¹²⁷ In 1983 the first consumer camcorder is launched and by the late 1980s *America's Funniest Home Videos* airs.

For Johnston (1990, p.91), early critical postmodernism with its unraveling ‘post-signifying’¹²⁸ orientation and push on the ‘materiality and textuality of cultural production’ is part of a resistance to the reification of aesthetic forms. Critical postmodernism is characterized as the art of the *diagram* through its ‘tracing and conjoining lines of deterritorialization already operating within aesthetic materials’. Examples that Johnston (1990, p.91) points to are Duchamp’s critique of ‘retinal art’ by his optical devices, the spinning *Rotoreliefs* which draw attention to the practice of seeing as much as to what is depicted, much like Tinguely’s metamachines and Feldman’s ‘music machines’. Likewise, while attempting to articulate a positive interpretation that refuses overemphasis of the individual subject, Johnston (1990, pp.91-2) argues for a postmodern consideration of ‘style’ as a form of *machinic assemblage* that has its roots in ‘post-signifying’ modes of working in which the fusion of ‘different semiotic regimes becomes the strategy for deterritorializing representation itself.’

The eclectic sprawling vernacular of Breer’s approach, which is neither primarily a private language nor radically deterritorializing and ‘post-signifying’, yet could be considered as a *machinic assemblage*, and contrasted to the singularity of the style of abstraction and its close connection to the individual subject that developed within high modernism and abstract expressionism. The latter which came to acquire, O’Doherty (1973, p.119) argues, ‘through some necessary

misunderstanding, a certificate of *identity*’, with the vanishing point in art becoming not the image, but the artist, whose ‘self-defining’ persona as an artist is perhaps most successful when it, as an organizing principle, also disappears.¹²⁹



Figure 84. Breer, *Bang!*

I would contend that *Bang!* does not delimit the work’s horizon to the specific contours of a peripatetic artistic ‘self’, but rather foregrounds questions of the (social) self, art and artist in relation to the development and exploration of form in a mode in which the searching subject, subject-in-process is central.

¹²⁸ Johnston (1996, p.63) describes ‘post-signifying’ as against a uniformity in the acts of signification which point to hierarchies of power, and signals rather the Deleuzian, ‘*absolute* deterritorialization’, to make consciousness an ‘experimentation in life’ which brings about ‘multiple points of subjectification’, and the metamorphosis of ‘becoming other’.

¹²⁹ Image Source: (Breer, 1959)

The film *Bang!* comes out of what Curtis (1983, pp.19-21) has succinctly characterized as a series of observational works made in the 1970s. During this period Breer (Moore, 1980, pp.4, 10) states that he started thinking, ‘of the film as me in the center of this new space I was living in, my new world,’ remarking that within the framework of his films, ‘I make my films to report on myself, it’s true. I allow things to come in whether they are apt or not.’ Breer (Moore, 1980, p.4) goes on to discern that he is not showing how he feels about the surrounding objects, which are at a certain level ‘interchangeable,’ that is, I would add, rooted in an engagement that attempts to break with the hierarchies of priority within normative cultural images: ‘The objects are really personality-less. Even though the phone becomes animated into a cartoon, it’s not convincing as a telephone with a soul... I’m constantly bumping into, using these objects around me... and I derive all my pleasure from them.’ (Figure 99)

The diverse experimental approach to form sustained in the later film *Bang!* 1986 elevates facets of the everyday whose density is shaded by the sense of the memoir. In the liner-notes written by Dieckmann (2008, p.2), typically associated with film catalogues, *Bang!* is said to be Breer’s ‘most autobiographical film’. *Bang!* on one level, would seem to raise the question of the influence and aspirations of his Midwestern childhood (near the shores of Lake St. Clair) after the shift in his work from geometric abstraction and ten years in the Parisian art-scene (during the 1950’s in part made possible by the GI Bill). Breer’s approach, nevertheless, contrasts with what came to be deemed the significant aspects of American identity in the characterization of e.g. the ‘American painting’ of abstract expressionism, that attended the postwar waning of the dominance in the artworld of Europe and its Parisian cultural capital.



Figure 85. Breer, *Bang!* (2 stills).

Breer’s work resonates, as suggested, with the neo-avant-garde refusal of such aggrandizement. Although within the film *Bang!* personal elements, such as, childhood drawings, snapshots, home-

movie footage are not clearly ascribed and surface in their aesthetic particularity with an indexicality that nevertheless remains to a degree ambiguous, workably poeticized, and bound to questions of the subject and form. Found and everyday objects are candidly interwoven with likely ‘personal’ effects and treated casually in a way that takes pleasure in the minor key of Americanness. The fleeting punctum and at times even haunting sensuous particularity of candid individual moments within the shots of the film, when woven in succession give way to the sense of the communality of customs, behaviours and habits that is occasioned by the form of witness associated with the snapshot tradition.¹³⁰

The snapshot of Breer (Figure 84) is reminiscent of the preoccupied pacing of a classic cartoon figure Felix the Cat (Figure 86). The association, to me, is made evident by the question mark inscribed on the photo (Figure 90). The hovering question mark over Breer would seem to be part of film’s destabilizing enquiry into the subject as given, and one might argue, thought itself becomes an active force for the subject, but is also implicated as part of an aesthetic force within form, prior to its consolidation in the conceptual. To this extent, while the ‘world’ itself is not necessarily given within the potentially ‘fantastical’ realm of the popular animated form, neither does much animation tend to exercise more fundamentally the possibility of ‘becoming-other’, or to un-think the world as given.



Figure 86. Messmer, *Felix the Cat in Oceanics*, 1930, (9.20min).

In *Oceanics* Felix, a star of the silent screen, performs his characteristically preoccupied pacing.¹³¹ The visual immediacy of the character’s experience communicated to the viewer is generated through the unpredictable surreal flow and changeable play with the plasticity of the minimal black

and white aesthetic, as well as, for instance, the polysemic potentiality of the ink splotch, or by confounding perception of negative and positive space through figure-ground reversals. This also includes inventive transformations of Felix’ body and body parts into amalgamations with the

¹³⁰ It is perhaps at this level that the sense of the collective contained within the image presented, risks being ‘tamed’ as part of a ‘generalized image-repertoire’, which, as Barthes’ (2000, p.118) argues, ‘de-realizes the human world of conflict and desires, under the cover of illustrating it.’

¹³¹ Image Source: (Messmer, 1930)

scenography and the interjection of words which makes the diegetic world of the film vacillate with the mechanics of its mimetic world.

The textuality and materiality of the effects in *Bang!* that are at once interruptive and directed at the viewer, have affinities with the energized diegetic film-space of Messmer's work, which is likewise interrupted by the many visual and textual addresses made by Felix turning directly to the audience. The modernist trope of 'direct-address' often used for the Brechtian affect of distancing within, say, counter-cinema and experimental films, is performed in this animation rather to ironically *instantiate* (Brown, 2012, p.16) the character and the imminence of its dilemma. The intimacy induced by direct-address, often occurs in a moment of respite from frenetic action. It strengthens the potential agency of the animated character at the instant of its likely destruction, and is characteristically double-edged, unraveling with riotously comic effect.

Breer's approach, however, does not posit a fictional world, but is concerned with modes of relatedness-to-the-world in which the traditional divisions between, for instance, materiality and representation is not elided but explored. Discussing his practice of the playful iterations between expressive drawings, photographic elements, and objects, Breer (Moore, 1980, p.8) nevertheless reminds us of the basis out of which the work arises saying that 'the photos are to say, LOOK, these are the very same objects I'm using in the film. There's no fantasy here at all.' The recursive (instantiating) iterations of materials and motifs and the (puzzling distancing) inventiveness of the work is, rather, processual, experimental and strategic.

The shot of Breer under a hovering question mark (Figure, 84) is part of a sequence which presents the interplay of artistic doubt and skepticism of the aggrandizement of the artist, appearing relatively late in the film with the snapshot of Breer no longer a young man. It becomes, however, underscored by the structure of melancholia, as suggested, by Benjamin's notion of allegory, not tied primarily to a subjective disposition, but more broadly expressed in

terms of the question of meaning, 'the world is no longer simply empty of meaning: it is simultaneously overflowing with meaning' (Weber, 2008, p.160).

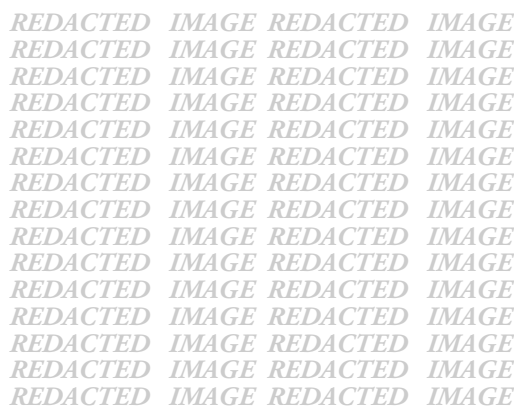


Figure 87. Breer, *Bang!*

The snapshot is preceded and followed by a range of animated and hand-drawn font styles in felt-tip marker. The suggestive style

of lettering and typeface, hand-drawn, scribbled, or technically rendered as three-dimensional drawings is reminiscent of the elusive and densely saturated text-image paintings of the conceptual Pop artist Ed Ruscha. However, due to Breer's discursive approach it eludes the iconic quality of Ruscha's assiduously monumentalized text-scenes and accentuates, rather, the interruptive and fleeting ephemerality of the many utterances which surface throughout the film, as well as the modernist lure of the distracting, snagging, tangibility of words afforded by the stream-of-consciousness mode.

Prior to the snapshot of Breer emerges the admonishment, 'DON'T BE SMART' before it disappears. The sequence is accompanied with the sardonic sound of a rooster periodically crowing, which continues over a snapshot of a sealion (Figure 87) whose barking is likewise indicated by sound-effects drawn in marker-pen of emanating lines, a shorthand of comic illustration. After the phrase 'DON'T BE...' is reasserted, it splats dripping down the screen's surface. The screen is subsequently given the particularity of a car's windscreen, evoked by the flickering, minimal and abstract use of negative space (Figure 85). Against this Breer's silhouetted profile emerges. The car, an enclosed interval with the windscreen becoming a cinematic situation, is tied to the monotony of long workday drives.¹³² In *Bang!* the phrase 'DON'T BE' is followed by the reproach, 'STUPID'. The word 'STUPID' visually echoes about the screen and across Breer's silhouetted profile before diminishing back into the depths of the screen's white space and being subsequently replaced by the word, 'CRAZY' which is more mercilessly masked by festive, easily popped, balloon letters.



Figure 88. Breer, *Bang!* (2 stills).

The sequence gives expression to uncertainty at one level, but also conceivably to Breer's (Cummings, 1973, p.15) desire to have his animation films 'taken seriously', in which not only

¹³² Breer (Cummings, p.17) in conversation states that for teaching workshops he had to do 'an awful lot of travelling around'.

does Breer take the importance and complexity of form seriously, but also maintains in his work a scope whose attention draws together art's contemporaneous struggles with those of the changing technological world. Breer continues, 'I didn't like the idea of being known as a nut experimenting off on the fringe, you know.'

The frenetic energy of the sequence and continual refrain throughout the film of the question 'WHAT?' – and its casual request for more about the identity or purpose of something or someone – is reinforced by a non-answer or non-sequitur. Here it is the intermittent flashing and silent banging in the void of the word 'NOTHING'... 'NOTHING'... 'NOTHING' sardonically conveyed 'in a big way' by oversized block capitals that don't fit within the film's frame (Figure 88). It could initially allude to an offhand riposte, a creative block, or to the sense of a lack of appreciation, which is glibly implied earlier in the film, (by a cleverly timed disjunction between sound and image, as discussed on p.201). However, as the expression is juxtaposed to another introspective snapshot of Breer under a suspended question mark looking out from the shore towards the blue horizon line, it also suggests an existential relation.

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Figure 89. Breer, *Bang!*

Digressing upon an early moment of independence and its association with the lure of machines, Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.3) recollects his renunciation of God around the age of twelve. The recollection interestingly relates to the late 1930s buildup to WWII during which Breer created the childhood drawings also included in this

film. (Figure 89) Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.3) states that, 'Growing up, I had intense fantasies about airplanes – in those days, bi-wing, open cockpit pursuit planes. [...] On Sundays, I was forced to attend church with my mother. I regularly tuned out the priests' Latin chanting at the altar by listening for airplanes overhead and fantasizing about being up there and free.' (Figure 85, left) There is a melancholic sense in which the thrilling freedom, facilitated by the machine, *from* the stricture of meaning (that is conceivably bound to the fundamental loss of certainty in God) nevertheless, becomes part of a question of nothingness, purposelessness, and insignificance when facing 'fade out', words that Breer scrawls in small white letters on a black screen before this is undercut, yet again, by another blithe interruption utilizing the word-image 'what?' indicating an irreverent refusal to fade out.

This diversity and density of the surrounding materials gathered in the film *Bang!* is vital to the shifting characterization of scene and protagonist, and is expanded by drawn animation text, that acts like stream-of-consciousness interjections and doodles within the film's scenography. These expressive digressions revel in the instantiations of script, as the word becomes image and vice-versa. The film's tone is explicitly set by Breer's use of common sayings, starting with the title-card *Bang!* hand-scrawled in a script that roughly, not in the painstaking manner of a Lichtenstein reproduction, alludes to the onomatopoeic-like action words of comics, but whose accompanying sound with humorous dissonance precedes the image. The potential uncertainty surrounding this incongruity is registered as intentional with the first instance of the query 'WHAT?', which is then reiterated in different conjunctions throughout the film with shifts to the valence of its meaning. Breer's work evokes the often intrusive disconnection and incidental quality of the domestic and urban audio and visual-scapes which are captured, disjunctively mimicked, or reconstructed, presenting an inventive repertoire, which finesses 'material' signifiers by the often satirical tensions, and comic mismatch between text, its representational image, and sound.

Breer's works openly explore the more sophisticated ways in which cartooning itself plays with aspects of graphic abstraction. Contextualizing the more explicit inclusion of the animated figure of Felix the Cat in the film, *Rubber Cement*, 1976, Breer (Fischer, 1976, p.7) states that 'there was a relatively new attitude exemplified by pop art which recycles cartooning into a fine art context', and goes on to identify '30's style cartooning as a protest to the art establishment – hence, my use of Felix the Cat in a basically abstract film.'



Figure 90. Messmer, *Felix: All Balled Up*, 1924, (3.45min).

Returning to the subject, Breer (Trainor, 1979, p.18) states that he 'put Felix the Cat in *Rubber Cement* as an homage to Messmer's work. I love it, it's terrific – there's something there that I don't know he knows he's done, but it's marvellous.' A consideration of *Felix in Oceanics* will be

briefly touched upon to elaborate correspondences with Breer's work *Bang!* 1986 which plays with the controlled anarchy of form suggested by Messmer's work. Aspects of the character and its associated tropes crop up in various guises in Breer's films, for instance, as a direct reference to the figure itself as noted, but also one could argue, more interestingly, in the earlier film, *Form*

Phases IV, 1954 which plays with graphic motifs associated with the character, such as, the dot-dash action and sight-lines but in an abstract manner. (Figure 21, 29)

Examples of the transformations Felix undergoes include his tail morphing into abstract shapes, most famously the suspended question mark, which pushed further transmutes from an exclamation mark into tools like a Chaplinesque walking stick, a baseball bat, telescope, lasso etc. At times his form sprays profusely becoming a fountain of exasperation, or merriment. At other moments he is literally transfixed in a state of shock under gyrating stars. Felix, who is then suddenly reoccupied, hurriedly whooshes about leaving fine plumes in his wake. Or once again, his cautious form projects dash-dot sight-lines that dart across the scene, visually guiding the viewer's attention as to his thoughts, anticipating his actions or indicating an array of noises despite the evident limits of silent-era cinema technology.

Some of these tropes have subsequently become timeworn, incorporated and repetitively disseminated across pop-culture, but with the difference that in early Felix films one also witnesses, within the very inclination to anthropomorphize, an explosion into an anarchic assembly of tendencies. In moments of works, such as, *Form Phases IV*, 1954 Breer's finds inspiration in the abstraction of these anarchic tendencies without the demand of their anthropomorphization, and representational re-domestication in narrative structures, such as character driven plot development, which comes to typify conventional animation. In the later film *Bang!* 1986, however, the imaginary and material mechanics of the (individual) subject becomes part of its challenge.

While there is not an explicit allusion to the famous figure of Felix the Cat, in *Bang!*, nevertheless, interesting correspondences with the spatial dynamics of its scenography occur. *Bang!* is permeated by a complexly layered concern with in/visibility which points to the (avant-gardist film) rejection of the 'original' *profilmic* space and foregrounds the tessellating distortions of the 'found' video-footage. This is intercut with *flatbed picture-plane*-like constructions, and the visibly lost trace of *rotoscoped* photographic imagery. The filmic space of *Bang!* is persistently interrupted, unstable, and kaleidoscopically constructed by diverse modes of image-making. The picture-plane, moreover, is continually disrupted, in a state of slow jump-cut flicker, or shattering into geometric forms, as other elements, by their contrast, manage to startle with the quality of being *extrafilmic*. As previously examined in *Bang!* elements appear to intrude from the everyday world, imperative phrases and non-sequiturs address the audience, while the loosely utilized device of stream-of-consciousness also evokes an internal diaristic mode of address which simultaneously foregrounds the process of animation itself, Breer's daily practice.

The structures of Breer's experimental film from his approach to the material-content of its graphic forms to the montage of its edit encourage, rather, an interrogative process of reading. The ambiguity of the film's course and its open-ending invariably present a difficulty to interpretation. Yet, it could also be argued that the sense in Breer's montage of fleeting indeterminacy is held in a dynamic or underpinned by the potent determinacy of form, as the expectations of narrative closure are stymied. Breer is less concerned with the seeming vagaries or imprecision of meaning. The focus is more clearly tethered to its profusion of sensual, perceptual, and (conceptualizing) processes held between destruction and construction. The final sequence of *Bang!*, as will shortly be discussed, is in a sense pointed as it deflects questions of the subjective poetics of abstraction and landscape towards the scene of the materiality of the medium and technology. (Figure 96, 99)

In the early collage-film, *Recreation*, 1956, the destabilization of the high status of abstraction by its montaged corruption with the 'low-value' of popular objects and printed matter, is presented in a manner that does not diminish the force of its sophisticated cohesion. Part of this early film's considerable achievement is that, compelled by the discourse of abstraction (in which the single-frame becomes a prominent feature), the renewed question of 'subject matter' strikingly irrupts. The attendant processes, sensual qualities and perceptual limits of Breer's single-frame aesthetics are inflected, not only by a certain conceptualization and structuration of form but also, as the intensity of the exploration 'regarding creation' would seem to hint. This is set in a 'dialectic of the heart' in which the question of abstraction becomes more deeply part of an expression in Breer's work as 'abstract experience' (expressions drawn from Feldman's (1985, pp.104-7), 'After Modernism', on art and the 'leap into the abstract').



Figure 91. Breer, *Bang!* (repeated landscape in flicker-frame sequence, 2 stills).

The play of abstraction and subtle distancing strategies in the trajectory of Breer's work become in *Bang!* more overtly inflected by a 'cool romanticism' (Klee, 1964, pp.313, 39) with moments

that evoke questions of the relation to a 'poetic-personal idea of landscape'. Breer's approach, however, for the most part remains rooted in and conversant with the situation and tone of the neo-avant-garde that sought to work 'in the gap between art and life' (Rauschenberg). This is paradoxically characterized by an attentiveness to the materiality, and conversely the indeterminate 'expressiveness' of the everyday, as Breer (Levine, 1973, p.6) attests to using everyday materials and exploring 'ambiguity as an expressive feature of the thing.'

Breer (Cummings, 1973, p.17) evokes Stein's modernist repetition to discuss the complexity of maintaining certain concrete parameters by asserting the 'film is what it is what it is...' and continues, 'that's the basis of my work. If I bring in any illustrative material, it's always subordinated to the design'. Breer's textural and textual approach, as well as his celebration of the technical, low-grade distortions within filmic reproduction confront the viewer by exposing the materiality of medium(s) as the work strives for a multiplicity to the image. In this way Breer diverges from the revelation of the 'fact' of the picture-plane so crucial to modern abstract practices. In Breer's case, it has correspondence with film's basis in the single-frame (and which is felt key to its role as a precursor of structuralist film).

The textual density of Breer's (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.50) single-frame aesthetics can be contrasted, as Breer reminisces, to Warhol's fixed-frame continuous-shot films, with a distance that has the effect of presenting a one-to-one ratio with profilmic events, 'One gets seduced by ideas. [...] it seems like the most obvious thing – the best things always are'. Breer touches here on the conceptualism of form in Pop whose staging and framing are underpinned by the mechanisms of *indifference*. This can be further linked to structural-film, which is also exemplified by the ways in which the subject is distanced.

Such an approach invites inquiry into the cinematic apparatus (with all its institutional and imaginary connotations, being at once a material and signifying apparatus). Structural-film characteristically emphasizes a material awareness primarily through the disclosure of the integral mechanisms and internal logic of the apparatus. It is within this framework the perspective and experience of the filmmaker is to varying degrees subsumed. Filmmaker theorist, Mazière (2003, p.7) in *The Solitude of a System* also addresses the crisis of the subject within the (modernist) experimental film practice. He considers it briefly through the point-of-view of Barthes (1978, p.43) in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, which designates a 'mask of discretion' whose excess is unconcealable, and suggests in parallel that the mode of structural film evinces a 'highly subjective sub text: *I want you to know that I don't want to show my feelings: this is the message I address to the other.*'

Against the systemization of form, Breer's (Coté, 1962, p.19) eclectic approach to the nexus of film form, however, is rooted in an engagement that is manifestly, 'against boredom. [...] I'd much rather anger them, though I should say the eventual goal is pleasure'. The often playful treatment of the graphic elements, and the attention paid to the material instantiations of a range of objects elucidates how *Bang!* weaves a complex relation between polysemy, and the discourse and debates of art as taken up by neo-dadaism.

Breer's (Moore, 1980, p.11) 'open situation' and inclusive practice is, for instance, conscious of the 'expectation of narrative' and plays against this, interrupting the more figurative moments with irrational impulses and subconscious elements, but also as suggested, with outbreaks of abstraction, and the structuration of the unplanned and unexpected. In this way the generally solemn, and the once high-value reputé of abstraction, for instance, becomes in *Bang!* part of an encounter with the low-value of comic pictorial graphics, and the 'abstraction' evinced by the explicitly low-grade experimentation of the video-transferred image, and an abstracted attention to the possibilities of *rotoscoping*.

Of such conjunctions, Breer (Moore, 1980, p.10) has stated that he can, 'bring in geometric elements once in a while, the way someone calls a meeting to order; it's a reminder of classic purity.' The quotation of geometric abstraction in Breer's work is approached in the vein of the neo-avant-gardes, and in the film *Bang!* abstraction itself takes on the valence of a historically contingent chronicle, that is saturated with a potentially, albeit ambiguously, personal, expressive and autobiographical sense. Conversely, the film *Bang!* would seem an overt accumulation of previously subtle acknowledgments that the revealed mechanisms of the cinematic image and aspects of abstraction are *always already* enmeshed to an extent with the fictional.

While Breer does not habitually draw, scratch, or paint directly onto celluloid film frames, modes for which the lyric and romantic filmmakers Brakhage and Lye have become celebrated, many of his films are primarily constructed in a one-to-one-variable ratio reminiscent of 'direct animation'. Discussing the immediacy which the hand-held physicality of index-cards evokes, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, p.45) states, that it 'allowed me to work very quickly[...] the images look very direct, because of the scale – the line is blown up, it's almost like drawing on film.' This one-to-one ratio can be contrasted with Warhol's long-take and extended-length films in relation to the real-time of profilmic events. The processes and ratios of construction within, as Breer often describes, his makeshift confined spaces telescopes back from the room and DIY rostrum-table to the single-frame utilization of the index-card format, which becomes with later works his signature field, (and relates back to his work with flipbooks, mutoscopes, and *rotoscoping*).



Figure 92. Breer, *Bang!*

Breer (Levine, 1973, p.9) directs attention to the hand-held physicality of the 4x6inch index-card, and of making upon it ‘something so personal as a line drawn with your hand’, to question the effect upon the rhythm and quality of the drawn or cut line and the shapes produced as it is subsequently blown up 1500 times during projection across a 40 feet span (approximately 12 meters). Breer (Fischer, 1976, p.5) contends, ‘there is a compression of scale which is made up for by an increase in energy.’ This vitality is also heightened by the way in which these index-cards, as frames containing a variety of possible screening-rhythms, are for instance, flipped, shot, shuffled, flipped and then shot again. Such frames might be shot once, twice, or three times each or held for much longer depending upon the possible cadences elucidated within this free-form process of editing. Knowing how many frames to shoot is a form of intuitive knowledge developed with practice and, for Breer, is not a mechanical procedure or task that could be delegated.

In the directness of this manner, it is furthermore argued, that the editing process should be as creative as the preliminary stages of image-making. As Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.35) indicates, he tries not to impose an extraneous order and objectives upon the work which does not arise from the process itself, stating, ‘the concrete replaces the ephemeral. The inspiration gets you moving, but the concrete is what you get at the end.’ This is also part of a desire to work independently creating artist-films that are, as Breer (Fischer, 1976, p.5) unassumingly puts it ‘...as much as possible a direct one-person product.’ This is, of course, in contradistinction to the divisions and hierarchies of value and labour within commercial animation production.

The ‘thriftiness’ of the index-cards, their handy portability and the way they are utilized as economical rushes before any shooting actually takes place, when combined with the decisive use of other non-specialist materials such as marker-pens, crayons, and e.g. the craft-based method of stencils and ink spray, flicked or blown (antecedent to the uniformity of aerosol spray paint) etc. is perhaps how Breer became misconstrued as the shoestring animator or ‘the five & dime animator’.¹³³ Differentiating himself from such monikers, Breer stresses that these limitations are

¹³³ Quotes in this section unless otherwise noted are from the *Five & Dime Animator*. It became known that Breer felt the moniker, popularized by the *Eleventh Hour* television documentary, was unfortunate. (*Robert Breer: The ‘Five & Dime’ Animator*, 1985, dir. Keith Griffith, with David Curtis C4, BBC, see also the *The Shoestring Animator*, Byron Grush, Contemporary Books, 1981)

not impoverished ‘aesthetic shortcuts’. These aesthetic decisions can be related rather as it has been argued here to the *deflationary tactics* evinced by the avant-garde and which pervades much contemporary art.

One might point to Breer’s unique re-functionalization of the *rotoscope* technique typically used by the cartoon industry to recreate seamlessly drawn, life-like gestures of often staid, humanoid characteristics. This entails for Breer a fundamental loss of the *joie de vivre* of animation itself. (Unless, of course one captures, by *rotoscoping*, the quintessence of the sur-real magic of the gliding back-step dances of Cab Calloway’s performance of *St. James Infirmary Blues*, used by Crandall for the ghost dance of Koko the Clown, in Betty Boop’s *Snow White*, 1933). Equally, Breer’s use of the rotoscope contains a critique and refusal of both the modernist ends of the scientism of motion and the animation industry’s means of a sentimental naturalism. Rather, realistic motion is corrupted by Breer’s loose *rotoscope* techniques allied with the freedom taken to alter the linearity of film’s single-frame sequences made possible by the flexibility of the shuffled index-cards.

This can be seen in an early sequence in *Bang!* in which the progression through a forest of trees becomes discernable, but remains on the cusp of disintegration into lushly jumbled pulsating movement and a dappled array with bursts of color in the foliage patterns (Figure 91). The subsequent sequence that presents a fusion of geometric and expressive abstraction in his treatment of *rotoscoped* footage of the televised baseball match (Figure 83) becomes a *tour de force*, and gives expression to Breer’s (Cummings, 1973, p.15) desire ‘to be taken seriously’. The struggle for recognition is amusingly intimated when fans cheer-on a baseball player up to bat, depicted by *rotoscoped* (redrawn) live-action footage of a televised game that has a dexterously sparse, quick and loose vitality in which the lines tussle to come together and then just as quickly break free of the figurative image *rotoscoped* (Figure 93). The sports commentator eagerly intercedes: ‘Anything can happen!’ referring to the high tension of a decisive moment in the sports event. However the commentary continues over the brief 1930s home-movie segment of Breer as a young boy canoeing whose future is rendered at once potentially open, yet cluttered and entangled with the scenes of social customs and mediation of the masculine imaginary (Figure 94).

The sound of the baseball stadium erupting into cheers cuts out as the ball is hit. With sudden perspectival force, it veers directly towards the camera, filling the screen, and silently ricochets into Breer’s hardedge graphic abstractions, then forms the elements of the word *Bang!*. Breer voices the question on the audio-track in the abstract lull before a renewed explosion of applause, ‘Hey! How come I don’t hear this?’. The spontaneous directness of the query wittily indicates a

possible technical discrepancy, which also immediately acts to undercut such doubts, ‘schooling’ the novice viewer of experimental films, or getting the active spectator onside. The question resonates more broadly as a deftly informal jest about the lack of appreciation of the form of animation. It becomes a metacomment on the condition of the *untimeliness* of Breer’s animation-film work whose previous lack of ‘serious’ acknowledgement within the art-world is, nevertheless, more readily legible today as the implications of the moving-image and particularly the technique of animation on the discourse of art becomes no longer fundamentally marginalized, and its critical potential increasingly appreciated in contemporary art.

In this way I would also read, the inclusion of ‘Anything can happen!’ spoken on the soundtrack by the sports commentator, at another level, as metacommentary of Breer’s own mode of non-traditional animation, which is made more explicit with his use of the technique of *rotoscoping*. While many students of animation are not typically engaged in experimental procedures to the degree that it becomes part of an embodied process, as evinced by Breer, nevertheless filmmakers that employ single-frame manipulation are confronted, in the early stages of practice with the notion that animation is the art of the interval and its trajectory is constructed out of incremental shifts or bold calibrations within a sequence of coalescing stills that generate the particular qualities of motion.

The influential 1940’s pioneer of the Canadian National Film Board’s animation studio, Norman McLaren, has defined animation by separating the form of the objects set in motion from the form of motion itself. Animation is, McLaren (Sifianos, 1995, p.62) famously noted, ‘not the art of drawings that move but the art of movements that are drawn. What happens between each frame is more important than what exists on each frame. Animation is therefore the art of manipulating the invisible interstices that lie between the frames. The interstices are the bones, flesh and blood of the movie, what is on each frame, merely the clothing.’ In Breer’s use of *rotoscoping* the trajectory of the movement is continued while the forms, which constitute this motion, become overtly corrupted and then the trajectory of motion itself is corrupted.

There is an old-style cartoon gag that plays with the economies of motion and against the seamlessess of subtle metamorphosis that is an example of this tenet, particularly for the way in which the trajectory of motion takes precedence within perception. Breer (Macdonald, 1992, p.25) retells an in-house joke of the animation studios, stating that ‘as a bird would fly across the screen, they’d replace one of the images with a brick. Because of the motion of the bird, nobody would see the brick.’ But the joke, Breer felt, should be shared with the audience, and this

conviction became an integral part of his mode of working. Sharp variations and disparate objects are incorporated along with strident fluctuations in line and stroboscopic-like bursts of



color inserted where subtle changes would be necessary to make the flow of a motion seamless.

Figure 93. Breer, *Bang!*

These interruptions in the penultimate sequence of the baseball hit scene in *Bang!*, include a player's form becoming increasingly lax scribbles, with the fore and background inverted at times, and another

player interchanged for a duck as he tumbles to catch the ball, a visual joke evocative of the cricket saying of a hitter going 'out for a duck'.¹³⁴ Like the ball, a slippery fish, undulating elegantly, darts with a sudden perspectival flurry toward the screen's surface transforming the space into a fish-tank. The game, after delicate Twombly-esque scrawling, returns, but this time as a football match in which a player is interchanged with a fighting-bull (Figure 95). The prominence of the cheering fans is a jostle of excitement, minimally rendered dots and the half moons of baseball caps and visors, and intercut with geometric forms (Figure 83). This is intercut with the televised live-action footage of the dank drizzly stadium and a crowd whose undaunted enthusiasm becomes somehow stoic. The drawn *rotoscope* sequences intercut with the sheer variety of photographic modes intensify the diverse textures of the moving-image, and while the drawn inclusions are ostensibly impulsive or absurdist, they also make apparent the inner workings of the cinematic form, and allude to the conditions of its image.

While not necessarily a reference to the major baseball sequence in *Bang!* 1986, the dissimilarities are of interest as in the previous year Warhol was commissioned by the Cincinnati Art Museum, to create a commemorative portrait of the Red's player-manager Pete Rose in anticipation of a career record-breaking number of batting hits, (previously held for half a century by Ty Cobb). The portrait action-shot is configured within the latest design for Topps collectible baseball cards and silkscreened onto four quarters of a canvas.¹³⁵ The oblique criticism in Pop of the commercialization of culture and art became with Warhol's late celebrity portraits more tightly

¹³⁴ to be 'out for a duck's egg' based on the shape of the number zero.

¹³⁵ 'It would be so cool if the art community could do something about that, instead of just the jocks and the sports people' said art dealer Solway to Cincinnati Museum director Rogers. (Rosen, 2010) (Warhol, 2007)

allied to publicity. Entangled with branding and materialism it was construed increasingly as affirmative.

The scope of Breer's work refuses to mark the flash of the lure of representation tethered to commercialization. Breer's particular pre-Pop relation to the cinematic image and his practical exploitation and exploration of 'old' technology, such as, the mutoscope, or the somewhat passé form of animation itself is neither part of a demonstrative 'super-fetishism' (Foster, 2003, p.101) long held characteristic of Pop, nor does Breer's work take a 'patronizing, touristic, and mock-critical attitude toward *kitsch*' (Sekula, 2003, p.449). Rather, it gives to experimental, neo-avant-garde film an equivocal, open, and yet popular valence by situating the question of the subject and practice in relation to quotidian objects and idioms of Americanness. In *Bang!*, for instance, Breer's nonspecific rendering of baseball would seem to retain a sense of the shared pride and revelry linked to its homegrown American status. *Bang!* shifts the focus from the sports hero to capture instead a moment of drama, the impact not only of team interplay but also of the integral involvement of the spectating crowd to give a fuller expression to the tension of the event.

Breer's approach is underpinned by the prescience of the fading commercialized-technologized promises of dominant cinema and advertising imagery, whose future already looks very much like the past against the displaced realities of the present. Breer's *deflationary* logic, furthermore, resists the fetishization of technology and the ideology of progress, or the exaggerated confidence in the correspondence between the advances in technology, quality and the inference of a greater possible naturalism. This is evident as Breer (Levine, 1973, p.69) addresses the scope of his own approach which encompasses other communicative possibilities, such as, the materiality, historicity and everyday experience of simple and complex technologies stating that it is 'important to not be too involved with technology, to sacrifice expressive involvement [...] the idea of surrounding myself with an awful lot of apparatus and then sitting down to work is, I think, wrong. I like to keep it very simple.'

Moving along a different vector it can be reiterated that Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.5) gives a sense of the fusion between a form of *haptic visuality* and the liberating possibilities of misappropriating the technique of *rotoscoping*, noting that he very 'roughly traced consecutive live-action images – seagulls in flight and such – from my 16mm movies onto four-by-six-inch index cards, to allow for flipping [...]. These fairly crude copies of realistic movement seemed somehow more realistic than ever.' The haunting indexical trace of the flow of natural movement within the loose, increasingly abstract forms on the cusp of being unfastened from the constraints of realism is expertly timed. The separation of motion from form has an uncanny realism that is rarely glimpsed and wholly exhilarating.



Figure 94. Breer, *Bang!*

Breer's work *Bang!* is a playful transcategorical, *postaesthetic* critique of various old modes and more recent technology. This includes the now ubiquitous, low-visibility of animation and the everyday, snapshot photography, as well as encompassing the relation of the significance of the viewer to the televised event, and the subject's

appropriation or mediation of the event in relation to the new availability of communication tools. The vernacular of both television clips of sports events and home-movie footage are opened by technical degradation in the transfer to film, which also indexes the new availability of consumer video equipment. The fragmentary banality of the live-action sources are re-functioned not just by the sequential repetition of the clips, but become distanced by their formal iteration within the expressive, loosely traced and intensively rhythmic reordering and rapid jump-cuts that are made possible by Breer's wholly unique experimental mode of *rotoscoping*. Breer's approach in this manner aims for a broader recognizability and appeal by celebrating, as Groys' (2010, p.7) writes in 'The Weak Universalism', the image of the 'low visibility of everyday life'.

The handful of snapshots of Breer, the candid affect of home-movie footage, the play with notions of home and homeland (Figure 92), as well as the childhood drawings included in *Bang!* (Figure 89) may no longer be considered an aesthetic intervention in itself. However, the utilization of the snapshot, as Roberts (2002, p.4) suggests more generally, continues to garner its potential force in the contingency of the photographic moment with the potential irruption of the real. Its use in *Bang!* also signals a consideration of the democratizing ethics of the image and presents a tangential question about the construction of identity, artistic or otherwise – that seeks a relation to the real through intersubjective disclosure within the everyday. One might, furthermore, reflect on Breer's neo-avant-garde and *deflationary* approach to technology itself and the content of the media clips utilized, in a relation to the current perspective of the image of the everyday, and everyday practices of the image at play within the extensive space of social networks. Breer's work *Bang!* would seem to touch on these fluctuations in historical conditions, and while more far-reaching than, say, the 1980s televised broadcast of home videos, the domain of the image is no longer, at a certain level, the exclusivity of the artist.

Roberts (2002, p.4) likewise, characterizes the logic of *deflation* as an increasingly ubiquitous condition of contemporary art in which, 'the boundaries between professional artist, occasional artist, and non-artist have been perceived to have been eroded in the 1990's under the conjunction of *postconceptual aesthetics* and popular access to new forms of visual technology.' In this situation claims made for artworks tend to elevate the selective act of the artist (i.e. 'conceptual' paintings of widely circulating 'found' internet and news imagery). This is often done in a manner that would seem to disavow the potentially technological democratizing of the image and pivots upon the institutional capacity to advance the artist as a representative figure, even while the implied (subaltern) masses are also frequently engaged producers of their own self-images. This space, Groys (2010, p.7) argues, was initially,

opened by the radical, neo-avant-garde, conceptual art of the 1960-1970s. Without the artistic reductions effectuated by these artists, the emergence of the aesthetics of these social networks would be impossible, and they could not be opened to a mass democratic public to the same degree. These networks are characterized by mass production and placement of weak signs with low visibility – instead of the mass contemplation of strong signs with high visibility, as was the case during the twentieth century.

Groys (p.8) goes on to acknowledge that 'resisting strong images and escaping the status quo that functions as a permanent means of exchanging these strong images' remains vital to contemporary artists. Considering the common refrain that *anyone* could make the de-skilled imagery of much abstract, minimal, found-object artwork, Groys (p.6) ironically posits that the avant-garde opened the 'way for an average person to understand himself or herself as an artist – to enter the field of art as a producer of weak, poor, only partially visible images'.

Without undermining the potentially democratic opening of this conjunction, and its 'weak universalism' or sense, perhaps, in which the currency of imagery is seemingly held by no one and circulated by anybody, Breer can be seen as simultaneously reasserting the artist's own anti-elite attitude, and connection to non-art. Yet, while the impression of artistic de-skilling, or 'weak signs with low visibility' has become, to an extent, indicative of contemporary art's rejection of strong images, Breer's approach, conversely, holds out a refusal to relinquish artistic skill and the poetic feedback of the aesthetic materiality of form. The conceptual configurations, reflexive critiques, density and skill of Breer's casually deflationary image, is despite its insouciance not something *anyone* could readily achieve.

In this way the ostensibly private and subjective vernacular of *Bang!* is refracted by broader cultural inferences in which, for instance, the impact of the (Duchampian) focus on 'optics' could be said to remain visibly integral to Breer's concern along with the mechanics of perception in relation to the playful dynamics of motion central to kineticism and to the 'motion' of pattern

associated with op-art. The transfigurations wrought by vicissitudes of scale, which Breer is concerned with, includes the quality of hand-drawn and hand-cut abstraction, exemplified here by the expressively *rotoscoped* figurative and landscaped imagery, as part of an approach that consistently explores and foregrounds aspects of technological reproduction.

This exploratory connection to the juncture of optics and kineticism is amplified in the final sequences of *Bang!* by the vertically spinning (phonograph-like) disc, and (pre-cinematic) *thaumatrope*. Such sequences retroactively elucidate a novel perspective by drawing on the rasterized video tessellation and recognizably 'low-budget' domestically produced quality to the image captured in *Bang!*, presenting an unusual melding of diverse, pre-/cinematic technologies and newly available contemporaneous modes of television and video technology. Breer's approach simultaneously rebuffs the structure and agenda of the animation and cinema industry, on the one hand, and the purist, often-precious attitude toward the medium of film on the other. This latter position has become currently resurgent with film's increasingly rarefied status, and made apparent by the medium's use in *artist films* that aim to predominantly signal its more recent accrual of high cultural value.

The source footage transferred into line-drawings, along with familiar materials and tools are embraced in *Bang!* for the way they have a shared, non-specialist recognizability, but whose particular attributes are re-functioned, vitalizing the image, characterized by the processual, exploratory aesthetic of the work. In an interview, Breer (1985) discusses how he pursues new markers (such as felt-pens) or inventive and novel methods that energize the qualities of line and form in order to, as he describes, 'banish tedium', which is intrinsic to the stringently honed, repetitive system of the animation industry. Breer's (Fischer, 1976, p.7) work, as argued, rejects traditional training and commercial animation which encourages the emulation of natural, albeit stylized, movement within prevailing modes of design stating, 'the whole passive acceptance of a style that is part of cartooning is the very thing that fine art questions'. The animation convention of cleaning-up and retracing lines, which is done within the studio system to standardize the image and line quality and produce a proficiency of style, has long been widely accepted as part of the tradition of independent animation. (See Figures 91, 93, 95) But within the sphere of art, the stylizations of animated naturalism and the conventions of realism in both the image and sound that typically underpin cinematic continuity are necessarily questioned. For Breer and many contemporary artists such stylizations are, moreover, perceived as exacerbating the indexical depletion of the image.

In *Bang!* the 'surface' particularity of the footage, including crucially the 'high-tech' yet ostensibly deficient image-quality of video, becomes part of greater processual exploration of the

technological and mechanical image imbued with the tessellated density and *haptic visibility* of the co-mingled image. This suggests, in other words, a visual perception akin to the sense of touch as it traces along the surface of the screened image and becomes immersed in texture even as it forms a continuum with *optic visibility* the scope from which traditionally, particular perspectives are maintained, (and encapsulated within the scenography).

Related to such concerns of aesthetic experience, Hayles (1999) polemical argument in *How We Became Posthuman*¹³⁶ foregrounds the integral relation between *embodiment* and materiality, emphasizing the experience of the body *in situ*/in the world. It refuses the long held mind-body split by exploring the ways in which thought may be performed through the body rather than fixing it within a cultural image. The *haptic* is a both an intensive and extensive embodied relation to, for instance, the hand-made (moving) image, which evokes the threshold between sensibility, sense and cognition that pervades Breer's concern with animation as a direct and concrete process. This relation also pervades Breer's transformation of the saturated space of everydayness, (however abbreviated and 'abstracted'¹³⁷ it often seems within the prevailing conditions of bureaucratized capitalism – of targets and monetization). Time and again, Breer comes to voice such concerns, both with and in terms of *dynamism*:

Hurray for a formless film, a non-literary, non-musical, picture film that doesn't tell a story, become an abstract dance, or deliver a message. A film with no escape from the pictures. A film where words are pictures or sounds and skip around the way thoughts do. An experience itself like eating, looking, running, like an object, a tree, buildings, drips, and crashes. A film that instead of making sense is sense. (Breer, 1962 in (Lebrat, 1999, p.73)

Brushing the notion of *embodiment* against a radicalized *haptic* aesthetics, Colebrook (2009) considers the perspective of unfolding movement, or, animating forces and matter that not only liquefies the cultural image of the body, but also begins to break from the body, as such. '[T]he question of life, touch, the difference between the text and the bodies it touches' Colebrook (2009, p.42) reminds us, 'has always been the spirit of poetry'. The radical framework of such a *haptic* aesthetics is located prior to intention and between the reciprocal act of the poetic touch, (e.g. in written and drawn lines) and the resistant immanence of life in the multivalent tendencies within matter and materials. It is with this inflection that I take my understanding of Breer's statement on the *ready-to-hand* domestic spatial dynamics of his often-makeshift workspaces and the way this factors in his processual relation to the moving-image. While Breer talks about being

¹³⁶ *How We Became Posthuman* critiques the lost body of cybernetics and information technologies in relation to the subject of liberal humanism's disembodiment.

¹³⁷ Abstraction in Marxian thought is a form of conceptual knowledge that designates the rudimentary analysis of a system, or object, and has the sense of extraction, the fragmentary and simplified content, singled out qualities or properties of actions or things – an object's redness and juddering speed, or e.g. *abstract labour* as the quantification of average labour-time for production and its exchange-value.

at the center of his films in works prior to *Bang!*, it is a self expanded by the processes of the cinematic situation, and is in contrast to the way traditional animation brings objects to life anthropomorphically.

Bang! an optic on the masculine imaginary

Breer begins to foreground the problematic of a more ‘homespun’ American masculine imaginary within the grain of the work as part of the question of the self, and does not unproblematically present a ‘neutral’ undeclared subject, which is the habitual proxy for the patriarchal subject. More significantly, one might argue, it is the anarchic processes at work, which is the lifeblood flowing through the best moments of Breer’s animated films. Even in the supposed self-reflection of *Bang!* Breer’s self-reflexive formal processes are a conducive, counteractive force that destabilizes the logic of a static representational identity.

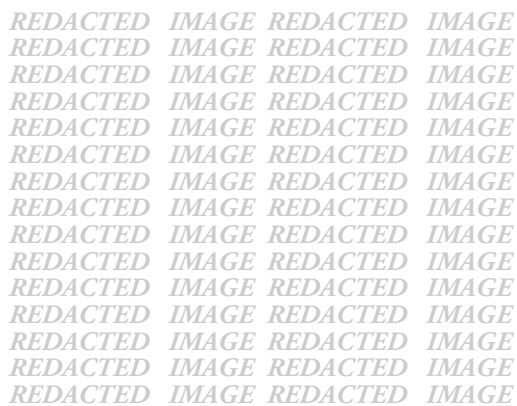


Figure 95. Breer, *Bang!*

Breer’s exploration of ‘outmoded’ technology is interwoven and contrasted with contemporaneous technology and popular modes of spectatorship. In *Bang!* he takes up the problematic of masculinized media-scapes of ‘all-American’ sporting events. The diverse sense of domestic

(sub)urban space in Breer’s 1970-80s films categorized by Burford (1999, p.90) et. al. for the use of *rotoscoping* (re-drawn live-action footage) becomes texturally telescoped well beyond the considerable cohesion and limited depth (of the *flatbed picture-plane*) of Breer’s early 1950s abstract collage-films. The intercutting in *Bang!* of live-action derived from a personal index of common scenes of the collective imaginary and media-scapes, such as, television and home-movie footage is re-figured within *rotoscope* sequences by loose expressive line-drawing in bold felt-tip markers verging on abstract collapse, yet captivatingly disjunctive. The photographic and representational moving-imagery are opened in novel ways by Breer’s graphic and technical distortions.

Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.4) argues that his work is underpinned by and continuously makes the ‘link between animation and mechanics’, and this is made evident by explicitly juxtaposing the different qualities of various modes of animation film (drawn, cutouts, *rotoscope*, *photofilm*, live-action) and references to pre-cinematic animation devices that subtly reveal the perceptual, *illusory*

nature of motion and its breakdown. In this manner Breer's explorative process engages by foregrounding or re-functioning various found-objects in terms of the juncture of kinetics and optics. There are many instances in Breer's film practice in which, for example, grids are shot and intercut in a manner that produces moiré patterns evocative of the fine-art juncture of kineticism and op-art, staged by the *Le Mouvement*, 1955 exhibition and references to diverse objects associated with 'pre-cinematic' devices abound and continue to fascinate even in the later film, *Bang!*.

In a sequence toward the end of the film, a section of the image begins to spin by a phonograph-like mechanism. This is reminiscent of Duchamp's vertical phonographic *Rotoreliefs* whose spiralling lines produced an illusory vortex. Except that in Breer's sequence the optical critique of 'retinal art' is referenced but destabilized by its ardent attention to the materiality of the moving-image constructed. In *Bang!* the spinning disc has an entirely flattening effect on Breer's repeated motif and choice of the 'found' picture-postcard landscape. (Figures 92, 96) This is complicated by a reversal of sorts as the mechanized rotation of the landscape is accompanied by the audio-track refrain of an airplane propeller.



Figure 96. Breer, *Bang!* (2 stills).

This conjunction alludes to earlier sequences within the film in which roughly drawn (wartime) planes tumble out of the sky emitting spindally plumes of smoke (Figure 96 left), and to crash-scene photographs of light aircraft. In this way an illusory vortex is produced in which the distorted non-perspectival spinning-disc is nonetheless instilled with an impending sense of the possibility of another plummet. With the antique tinted quality of the photographed image, one might be tempted to imply that the scene is imbued with the romantically quixotic and precious para-surrealism of Cornell's pre-cinematic devices. However, the sheer illogicality of the (vertical-phonograph) spinning cutout section of the foliage and tree-lined path drolly deflects the countenance of whimsical or nostalgic pathos by its compulsion for the mechanics of form.

The spatial simulation gives a sense of post-cubist juxtapositions, which is further complicated by the textural qualities of the differing, disjunctive mediums and the effects of different modes of motion upon representation. For example, the blurred postcard foliage with its vertical phonograph-like spinning is intersected by a previous form of rotational motion, which is produced by a re-constructed pan across a different scene of foliage ending in a window box of blooming red Impatiens. This latter pan, likewise flips from the verticality of a live-action frame and is transposed with a pan across a few still photographs aligned in a strip on an animation rostrum-table evoking the horizontality and limited depth of the *flatbed picture-plane* (Steinberg).

Equally, one might point to how this same picturesque postcard landscape, as a repeated motif, is spun by hand toward the end of the film, and the image becomes an overtly manipulated object. At first spun tentatively, the image is revealed to be part of a flat two-sided card, re-creating the revolving motion of a *thaumatrope*. In rotation the image exceeds the frame edge, and destabilizes the *picture-plane* of the screen. Customarily the singular comingled image of the *thaumatrope*'s two simple pictorial elements appears by dint of the viewer's 'persistence of vision' as the object is spun at speed. In *Bang!* the flipside of the path pictured is yet another scenic landscape, a foliage-lined waterfall, (a harbinger of gravity, of falling, failing). The complex scenes on either side of the card compete, refuse any combination, and deter the possibility of creating a new virtual picture, becoming instead abstract floating horizontal bands of streaking colours. This new image of the two-sided *thaumatrope* that fails to coalesce is then incongruously intercut with a pro-wrestling match re-filmed off the monitor of a television-set.

The close-up image of wrestlers depicts the moment when two bare-chested torsos initiate the release of a tussling hold (Figure 97). While a slight gesture, it is vividly amplified by the accompanying sound of a fizzy canned beverage being cracked open. This might fleetingly suggest the play on words between the wrestling ring seen and the sound of a *ring*-top or *ring*-pull which evokes, furthermore, the social custom of typically masculine camaraderie through beer drinking and watching sports. This incongruous and anarchic sequence, nevertheless, has an amusing correspondence to the much earlier 1930s home-movie footage of a head and shoulders shot of Breer, around ten years old rowing with an intent physicality, boyish and bare-chested (Figure 94). The trajectory of the canoeing scene is suggestive of uncertain adventures and new independence, and has connotations with the phrase 'paddling one's own canoe' in which a way through the changing topographical fragments of this 'world' must be charted. By contrast the much later scene of the wrestler's full-grown hulking physicality, laconically signals a passage to adulthood, which is satirized by a sense of the protagonist 'wrestling with masculinity'.



Figure 97. Breer, *Bang!*

This connection is established by the non-professional transfer of the home-movie footage of the boy and the shots of televised sports events, such as wrestling, and reinforced by the formal pattern including the similar framing of the shots, degraded effects and color distribution of its material

display. The early 1930's 'amateur' use of film is transferred to video, and is re-engaged in the 1980s moment with the new availability of 'consumer' video. The footage undergoes an explicitly low-budget transfer by being re-filmed and marks the changing parameters of the moving-image. This material process, and the paradoxically chimerical aspects of technical form draw attention to the striking temporality of the punctum with which the boy's image is seared.

In both the footage of the boy and of the televised wrestlers the particularity of the blue-tinted raster-scan lines becomes an expressive element, along with the distinctive, horizontal luma bars that are a result of different film-frame to video-field rates. In the near-final sequence of the film, the light and dark luminosity scrolling through the resultant image of the wrestler's hold is match-cut, with the spinning *thaumatrope* and its bright variably-sized colour band against a dark background (created by the velocity of its rotation). Despite being intercut in seemingly expressive and contingent ways, these objects and processes work to expose the complex nexus of the 'moving-image' itself.

The rasterized grid patterns of video and TV footage made visible by shooting images from electronic monitors onto film is a playful iteration in contemporaneous technology that, it could be argued, harks back to Breer's earlier engagements with moiré-like patterns which, as suggested, evoke the juncture between kineticism and optical art. This is additionally referenced in *Bang!* by a hasty-looking blurred shot, a throw-away gesture and 'in-joke' based on the found-object of a novelty postcard picturing skiers carving moguls (Figure 98). The incongruously processed negative-like deep red sky against the white snow of the postcard's scene mirrors the prominent flickering of reds running throughout the graphic abstractions drawn on index-cards of the previous scene.

The rectangular postcard is suspended within the black space of the frame and with a wobbly rhythm moves forward. (I am reminded ever so briefly of the receding and expanding white-

square on black and reversal of the black square on white in Richter's Dadaist film *Rhythmus 21* (Chapter 1). This shot is immediately followed by the quip 'Don't Be Smart' scrawled across a crisp white screen. The motion effect of the skier's sharp side-to-side thrusts is created by angling



the 'flicker picture' forwards and backwards under the camera, and is produced by the lenticular printing technology of the card.¹³⁸ The lenticular card with its resonance of contemporaneous imaging techniques and reference to sports also functions by foreshadowing the pre-cinematic *thaumatrope* revealed in the final sequences of the film.

Figure 98. Breer, *Bang!*

As suggested, Breer's style of working has an affinity with early notions of the exploratory process within art and the prioritization of the procedures of making, which become evidently central to the subject of the work over the traditionally formal resolution of the art-object. The concern with thresholds is captured by shifts between a playful affirmation of the 'integrity of the picture-plane' (Greenberg) that is then unravelled by a process-oriented approach that leads to the disruption of the picture-plane, with the interjection of textual elements, and a foregrounding of the materiality of the filmic image. Equally, the associated formal innovations that arise from such an approach can be subsequently relinquished at the moment when they too begin to ossify or become easily codifiable. Breer (Beauvais, 2006, p.163) asserts, 'it has to do with thresholds of definition, in other words, challenging film and challenging sculpture is done by going to the limit of the definition and going past it.'

Despite the shared engagements cursorily outlined throughout this thesis with the neo-dadaists and neo-avant-garde, Breer's work at this time, including the work of the mid 1980s, nevertheless risked an outsider status, or incompatibility with art's gallery system, and a degree of incomprehensibility in the art-world due to his utilization of the 'low' or marginalized art of the film medium. To exacerbate this, Breer's practice in experimental animated film persisted in a distinctively exploratory manner as can be seen with the elusive narrative of *Bang!*. While Breer's

¹³⁸ Lenticular printing involves a ribbed transparent plastic layer made up of parallel strips of refracting 'cylindrical lenses' which interlaces several frames between two of the most extreme positions of the skier's turn.

‘style’ has many imitators in the 21st C, what has not been paralleled is his capacity to underpin such formal explorations in the moving-image in a manner that not only critiques the conventions of animation-film, but also works through art and art-historical concerns at the very moment in which it had begun irretrievably expanding – the sphere of art becoming characterized by the problematic of *postconceptual* and *postmedium* aesthetics.

This situation and Breer’s attitude and approach give him an unusual degree of independence, and an unparalleled filmmaking praxis that operates in a dynamic between certain distancing strategies, processual relations and an engagement with forms of *haptic visibility* exemplified by the attention to both technically-derived and hand-manipulated textures in his animated film-works. Ready-to-hand materials and a directness in construction and mark-making etc., become part of a day-to-day unscripted endeavor which includes improvisation and reworking back into the sequences, creating variations that build up a dense play on quotidian themes and everyday objects with which he is surrounded. Discussing this, Breer (1985) declares,

I’m playing with brain reception, which is taking in heterogeneous stuff all the time, I can get in step with the brain, looking at my film. I can throw out a traffic signal here, an abstract consideration there, a bird song here and a market list there, the way our daily life is.

Elsewhere, Breer (Moore, 1980, p.10) describes, ‘My aesthetic now has to do with being able to incorporate everything - the kitchen sink idea of everything goes - not ‘anything goes’ - a positive welcoming of expression’. This process, while rooted in reflexive experience and know-how or procedural knowledge and memory, is made explicit by the interplay between serendipity and the performative precision of animation *timing*. This is usually associated with character animation but in Breer’s work it is explored as an aspect of abstraction. Yet, Breer (Mekas & Sitney, 1973, pp.50-1) alludes to this intensive relation as part of the question of the subject and process noting: ‘You know, the time when you are working on an animated film, the time ratio between the amount of work on images - the scale of working from small things that are eventually shown at my dimension... from all these little drawings, it takes you a day to do one second... I am trying to make sense, biologically, or kinesthetically, with myself, between what comes out on the screen and how much time I put into it.’

To reiterate, the pervasive problematic of the optics of motion, which had become a key concern of ‘modern’ times, is broached overtly in Breer’s single-frame film *Recreation*, 1956, for instance, but also interestingly in Breer’s earlier film, *Form Phases IV*, 1954 not only in terms of the mechanics of animated motion but, as Breer (Coté, 1962, p.18) notes, as a subversion of the ‘fixity’ of abstract and pictorial relations within the image. The nexus of this theme underpins the tactics of *Bang!*. As mentioned earlier, in the discussion in which Breer (Kuo, 2010, p.4)

foregrounds the important 'link between animation and mechanics', he also reminisces about his youth and lifelong interest in the automobile and aircraft. And it would seem that in the atypical work of *Bang!* these attitudes are cut and welded together.

The incongruous juxtapositions in the final sequences of *Bang!*, whose connections are based not on their image-content but upon other expressive and formal kinetic features which deflect questions of the possible poetic-personal potentials of abstraction and landscape towards the scene of the materiality of the medium. This is done in a manner that confounds closure. The sometimes-obscure de-constructive perspective of animation-film and the mechanics of vision is not limited to the open-ending of the film *Bang!* as Burford (1999, p.124) suggests, but it could be argued is introduced from the outset, by an early sequence in which childhood illustrations are presented in a manner akin to slide-projection, or *photofilm*, one still shot after another.

The preoccupations of youth are deftly dealt with and the ostensibly personal drawings are, nonetheless, treated with a degree of *indifference* as image-objects, in which the pen and pencil drawings on ruled foolscap, are not stylistically imitated or re-animated. The *subject-in-process* suggested by *Bang!* is part of a refusal of a certain aggrandizing romanticism of the artist that is consistent throughout Breer's oeuvre. One might argue that in *Bang!*, for instance, this figure is also irreverently undercut by giving prominence to the artists' juvenile drawings with the quixotic, imitative and familiar fluency of its aspirations. Such a move has the 'surface is depth' sensibility of the 1980s revitalization of American literary realism, 'dirty', ordinary and minimalist with the frank prose of awkward details, silences and unresolved moments. (Thompson, 2007, p.50)

The boyhood sketches are steeped in blithely archetypal images of potency and adventure, including a loincloth-clad muscle-man, a safari hunter with shotgun, big-game animals, the dedicated detailing of light fighter aircraft and wartime scenarios, as well as, a shapely female form in a 1930s high-waist two-piece playsuit that pans-up to reveal her head, which has been abandoned in frustration and remains scribbled out, defaced. Breer's facility for cartoon illustration is presented in the portrayal of longsuffering characters waiting in a queue, signaling Breer's fledgling but deliberate foray into the conventions of cartooning. This is indicated, for instance, by an exaggerated bulbous nose, or, by a lean man with oversized shoes and ill-fitting attire, reminiscent of Chaplin's Tramp, seated near to a sizable woman rumped under an ostentatiously large hat, and squished between them, a boy balks, eyes bulging, trussed up in his Sunday-best. The inclusion of such sketches has the quality of extemporization, but is lightly touched with the poignancy of self-satire.

The aesthetic significance and indexical qualities of such early drawings are retained by their

treatment as image-objects. Utilization of this limitation is evident in the handling of the sketches of light wartime aircraft which builds to create an ingenious but ‘crudely’ animated sense of flight. By panning over the picture and wiggling the entire page under the camera in one sequence, Breer wittily suggests a plane preparing for take-off by the mimicry of child’s play. The drawings and this particular quality of motion together become evocative of the ‘innocence’ of bygone days and nascent talents, but conversely such sequences also knowingly revel in the callow, ‘unsophisticated’ perspective of youth. This un-idealized, developmental baring of form is juxtaposed with Breer’s phase of geometric abstraction, whose execution is no longer tied to the resolute discourses of the past, but is nonetheless vibrant, and with a certain irony, becomes loosely narrativized within the flow of the work’s broader abstraction. Likewise, the use of the amateur drawings as objects also contrasts obliquely with Breer’s unconventional use of *rotoscoping* (or re-drawn animation of live-action footage) which, with great flair, becomes increasingly loose and abstracted while yet remaining figurative (e.g. the images of televised sports fans, the tense action of a baseball game, a bare-chested shot of professional wrestling and Breer as a boy).

As Burford (1999, p.124) indicates, the film’s difficulty lies with its ‘different techniques, blowing to bits any possible “story”, just like the bombs represented.’ With the breadth of images and sources and the wide appeal of *Bang!* to aspects of experience, such as, youthful optimism and later melancholic disillusionment, the work at times staggers unwieldily. Even so, it manages to capture the aftermath of the *bang* of conception, the burst of creative invention, confident enthusiasm, and new love and the *bang* of formal breakdown, of gravity, falling and crashing, the chilling excitement of war, and the controlled eruption of abstraction (accompanied by a submerged, low rumble on the audio-scape). Burford (1999, p.124) argues of *Bang!* that ‘the explosions refer to anxieties the young Breer may have had during WWII’ resuming that ‘the child’s fascination for planes and graphic representations of war then become an experience of horror. [...] Children play at war; adults continue the war-games, but the consequences are so much more devastating.’ It will be briefly argued that *Bang!* raises a more conflicted and embedded sense of such matters.

Part way through the film *Bang!* the potent quest of such freedoms carried by the expectant whirl of a small plane’s motor is overtaken by the more haunting sounds of war and the heavy hammering of machine-gun fire. The aftermath is depicted by insubstantial spindly crayon-drawn plumes of smoke, which arise from behind a picture-postcard landscape which features throughout the film and prominently at the end (Figure 96). Over this a snatch is heard sung of ‘the twilight’s last gleaming’ a muddled fragment from the Star-Spangled Banner in vibrato as it becomes a distant diminuendo. It lingers over Breer’s boyhood portrait of Hitler whose mustachioed and slickly groomed head looms like the mighty King Kong, (popular since the

1930s in film and print-media) over the silhouetted cityscape encircled by insect-sized fighter planes.

Such sequences give an explicit sense that moralizing about the straightforward horrors of war does not entirely fit the fugitive truths and ‘affective logic’ of *Bang!*. It persuades rather by its engrossed disenchantment, which is rooted in Breer’s nimble skepticism. Investment in the games of war is not presented as an extension of youthful play except with graver consequences, but is explored rather in a more complicated manner as culturally engrained, instilled in childhood. The specificity of the drawings index not only boyish fascinations, but also an ingenuous juvenile distillation of popular, culturally recognizable themes.

Perhaps conversely, as Benjamin argues of the allegorist, it is through the seriousness of play in montage over the presentation of fragments that becomes a fundamental way to respond to death, and to the ‘god-forsaken’ world devoid of essential, ‘natural’ meaning. Likewise, the lackadaisical thrills, and conversely, the comfort sought in the machineries of motion are engagingly thwarted in Breer’s works and kaleidoscopically blasted to discover different possible horizons within the everyday.

In *Bang!* this endeavor becomes underscored by the structure of melancholia, not in terms of an alienated subjectivity mourning for the past, but as exposed by an emersion from within the relations of the masculine lifeworld. The problematic and material relations of masculinity are presented by an extemporaneous ridicule of its own ‘male gaze’ as the film *Bang!* attempts, somewhat uneasily, but often amusingly to objectify the transient and nascent ‘male fantasies’ that arise.

Halfway through the film attention is drawn from war bombs toward sexuality with, for instance, the fluctuating rhythmic cartoony image of the female nude, which is preceded by a scrawled text implying phone-sex, or the anticipation of a new date with ‘boy oh boy’... ‘tonight’s the night’. Scuttling out of shot and throughout this sequence is the toy-telephone (Figure 99). The tone shifts from the dizzy heights of unchecked expectation as a woman on the audio-track indignantly asserts, ‘What? It’s such a male fantasy!’ followed by Breer sheepishly muttering in agreement. The youthful preoccupation with flying, freedom and flights of fancy comes crashing down to the sound of a crowd’s gasp.

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Figure 99. Breer, *Bang!*

Reappearing in the last shot of the film, the toy-telephone creates an open-ending. Resembling an iconic ‘chatter phone’ pull-toy, but mechanized, the image gives a sense of the elusive breadth and absurd humor with which Breer considers the mechanics of motion. It is also

reminiscent of Breer’s earlier *Floats*, the minimally car-shaped kinetic sculptures, and plays pithily with the comical pathos of its ‘character’, the stuttering waddle of the object, which nonsensically drags its handset tail (redolent of Felix the Cat). The image is accompanied with the repetitive sound of a busy signal that once customarily indicated a failed transmission or unsuccessful connection with a receiver and is overlaid with airplane motors whirring once again, and an upbeat end-credit sitcom-style theme music. To an extent, one might consider the difficulties of *Bang!* as part of the candidness of its experimental form to potentially fail by its quick-fire connections and its resistance to the contemplation of the strong signs; orientated by the device, the communications handset is drolly tugged along.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to elaborate the dynamic nexus of Breer's thought-provoking work, and its reflection on the legacy of modern abstraction and avant-garde aesthetics, through its particular *paraconceptual* engagement with the apparatus of animation-film. The critical optic of Breer's films navigates the trajectory of abstraction in art, and is argued to manifest aspects of contemporary postwar debates in art on the dynamics between the structuration, construction and expression of form. The trajectory of abstraction within film is taken up, moreover, as part of a broader encounter with machine-aesthetics evoked by the problematic of its kinetic montage, and rooted in the once urgent questions about the representational and postcubist status of movement and its far-reaching discordance with the traditional principles of stasis and balance. Such questions and debates and their transposition into the moving-image is, likewise, speculatively revisited through a range of theoretical frameworks to develop a sense of the potential intersection of the materiality and *paraconceptuality* of Breer's approach to animation-film. This aims to contribute to expansion of the critical conception of animation, as it gains an apparent visibility within art as part of the current prevalence of the cinema-situation and the moving-image more generally within the sphere of art.

To counter the perceived aestheticization and excesses of the image-content of experimental film, and to emphasize how the image-content is by no means a subsidiary feature of the significance of Breer's primarily non-narrative work, this thesis has endeavored to explore how its complexity necessitates a more detailed reading. This has entailed delving into the density of its references to the extra artistic real, touching on the way the diverse array of image-objects, included in the work, are nevertheless actively materialized, not cohesively pictorially subsumed, in striking juxtapositions, sometimes utilizing chance collisions, as part of a variety of processual and experimental procedures. The important emphasis on the work's critique of artistic conventions and its transcategorical perspective is, likewise, situated within art's substantially changing postwar framework, after-modernism, by drawing on more recent periodizations of art. Breer's proto-structuralist impulse in film, it has been argued, expands upon the modernist questions of form exposing aspects of its underlying structure and of cinema's cultural apparatus, while allegorizing the problems of abstraction and destabilizing the unifying and totalizing perspective once sought in the idealizations of high modernism.

While the deflationary humor, hands-on and whimsical absurdity of the work also punctures the triumphal iconology of high capitalism, its historicity and engagements are also traversed with broader questions of the period, developed in terms of a problematic central to Benjamin, and what Gilloch (2002, p.245) has called, the 'fate of the image under the conditions of modernity'.

In this light, Breer's work has been explored for the ways it uniquely presents a disjunctive encounter with the materiality and historicity of experience, in which the defunctionalization of movement and its spatio-temporal dislocations are poetically figured against the particular machine-aesthetic of commodity production, as it underscores the vicissitudes of modern consumer society, while its critical optic confronts many of the fundamental assumptions within animation-film and art, to reinvigorate an image-space out of new possibilities might be constructed.

Breer's approach allows for, and has necessitated, a reflection not only on the interactions generated by its animated image-content, but also importantly of the way its critical optic on conventions points beyond previously held categorial and disciplinary parameters, which it is argued gains a renewed relevance for today. The exploration of the materiality of film, is expounded by the single-frame aesthetics of the work, and supported by the revival of pre-cinematic objects, in the conjecture of the cinematic apparatus as film-object. This intersects, additionally, with the tactical shifts of the period associated with *assemblage* and the postobject engagement with processes, as well as the emergent conceptualism of the *neo-avant-garde*. Explicating the complexity of this nexus has also involved investigating the work's traversal across media, as well as the transmedia condition of the photographic. The conceptual valence and potentiality of *aesthetic reason* in works of the *neo-avant-garde* with which Breer is allied to, has likewise, been probed as part of the revaluation of its dismissal as the becoming institutional of the avant-garde, and is argued to be operating prior to art's looming collapse into marketization. This juncture after the heights of modernism and prior to the surface depths of pop-art, gains a renewed relevance when its mediation of mass-culture is deemed to be a more complex response to technological changes in the sphere of experience wrought by the intensification of capitalism. The ways in which this nexus forms an integral part of his process is crucial to locating Breer's animation in a critical art context and connects it to the concerns of this period, creating an opening in experience to the technologized everyday, which renders a certain legibility to the spectacle.

In this manner, Breer's approach has been argued to present a reflexive process, and critique of the condition of art, and the bounds of its institutionalization, as it touches on the implicit promise of art, which goes beyond the object. Roberts (2015, p.2) suggests that the complexity of art's autonomy, its 'non-identity in the face of its institutionalization', and the 'means-ends rationality of capitalist exchange value' resides in its double character, its severance from and entwinement with reality and society's function. While Roberts' (2015, pp.33, 2) framework presents a continued critical defense of 'autonomy-in-heteronomy', as part of a '*critique of autonomy itself*' (as a condition of art's resistance to its own aesthetic self-enclosure)' he opens with a caveat

of the waning ascendance of the precepts of painting and its traditional skill and craft-basis, during this postwar period. Once the 'arbiter of value', this produced its own 'symptomal disorders' as the problematic of art's autonomy shifts with art that sought to make sense of changing historical conditions, and becomes reframed in terms of the confluence of the conceptual and formal, as part of its engagement as a 'general social technique'. The struggles and operations of Breer's work have been considered an exemplar not of the ensuing ascendancy of conceptualism, but of the emerging complexity of the period's paradigmatic shifts, expressing both its difficulties and disorders, as well as its engagement through animation-film of art's aesthetic autonomy.

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Also important to this thesis has been the exploration of the way Breer's work touches on the myth of the presence of the artist, through its mediation of the subject-in-process as part of its playful shattering and reconstruction of subject-object relations. Dealing with the overriding avoidance in Breer's practice of the melancholic end-game and supposed resistance, which Roberts' (2015, p.2) cautions against, of the politically 'debilitated zones of personal creativity', or one might add, its spiritualization has also been an imperative part of its investigative form, regardless of the seemingly effortless flair of its experimental style. Conversely, the neo-avant-garde's critique of the primacy of visibility addressed through strategies of 'aesthetic indifference' is in Breer's work evocatively undercut, contradicted, and often overwhelmed by the persistence of a palpably aesthetic responsiveness. This threshold of Breer's work is simultaneously a feature of its multifaceted density and could be taken as an attribute of its resolutely troublesome imperfection.

These reflexive breakdowns and their fleeting rapidity are crucial to the work's activation and exhilaration, which stems from its semantic instability (after high modernism) and presents an evocative expression of the 'preponderance of visual stimuli', which Benjamin (Gilloch, 2002, p.245) identified as a key trait of urban experience. While it is necessary to allow for this instability and the incongruity of the status of visibility, this thesis has not sought, through its close readings of Breer's work, a critical ambivalence, but rather a space to investigate its (post)aesthetic complexity and broader mediations, as well as to elaborate upon how this difference from past practices is importantly registered in the work. This thesis has sought to expand on the ways in which the aesthetic research, experimental basis and changing problematic of the materiality of the subject in Breer's practice in animation-film circumvents the protracted dogmaticism of formalist abstraction, on the one hand, and the myth of the instinctive or spontaneous transmission of the artist's subjectivity within expressionism on the other. Such

divergences throw into relief the emerging primacy not of the manifestation of the idea but acclaim for the artist's authorship of the nominated object with the ensuing marketization of *postconceptualism*.

The nexus of Breer's work and such circumventions have a renewed relevance for the *postconceptual* period, which must tackle the question of what constitutes the demonstration of rigor in art at a time, Osborne (2006, p.32) describes, of 'increasing aesthetic nominalism'. The nomination of the readymade, for instance, initially functioned as an institutional intervention that occasioned the subversion of the primacy of visibility as part of the cumulative onslaught on traditional paradigms of aesthetic experience. In this context, Breer's early moving-image works could conceivably have been presented as part of an art-institutional intervention, however, this dynamic is modified by the work's compelling mediation of received traditions as part of the work's assertion not of anti-art aesthetics but of the transformation of art itself, made by the then marginal or non-art medium of film. By tracing the way the *paraconceptual* framework of animation becomes integrally mediated in Breer's work, this thesis has also aimed to give a sense of Breer's continued relevance.

On the problematic of the *postconceptual*, Osborne (2006, p.32) (1991, p.70) argues, that what becomes significant is how a work creates the 'conditions of its own intelligibility' or addresses the 'framing conditions of representation through its interventions within the realm of representation itself.' The shifts in the postwar conditions of art, underpinned by the relocation of its epicenter from Europe to America, is reflected in Breer's migration, and touched on in the changing questions of the construction of the subject, which arise within his work. This juncture followed by the extensive transnational dispersal of art experienced today, however, also raises the significant historical limitation of this postwar navigation of the Western artistic tradition, in which attention must be drawn to the West's previous hegemony, and the importance of the radical geopolitical transformation of art's grounding today.

Attention has been drawn to the range of modes by which Breer's work delves self-reflexively into its subject, yet avoids the supposition of an often depoliticizing aura, and the mystification of *presence* in art. The dynamic between aestheticism, the *politics of representation*, and the *representation of politics*¹³⁹ is also touched on, and dealt differently by a constellation of figures, such as the recourse to the auratic presence in the silence of Brakhage's prediscursive expressive abstractions, as well as in the recent tone of romantic nostalgia essential to Dean's reflection on film pitted

¹³⁹ The 'representation of politics' (Burgin, 1986a, p.85) highlights its heteronomous (socio-political) determinations via a more didactically proposed message, whose counter-ideological effectiveness is primarily celebrated as agit-prop. Less attention has typically been paid as to how the autonomous dynamic within such art may likewise strive against its own potential instrumentalizations.

against the digital, and one could add in the asceticism of the structural-materialist tenets of Gidal's films. While the supposition of the aura in art may also have a critical aspect, it is worth turning to Burgin (1986b, p.39), on the problematic of the *politics of representation*, when he argues for the underlying importance of 'recognizing, intervening within, realigning, reorganizing these networks of differences in which the definition of "art" and what it *represents* is constituted: the glimpse it allowed us of the possibility of the absence of "presence", and thus the possibility of *change*.' In this period of photographic inundation, the world attains an increasing visibility, which is not necessarily accompanied with a comparable lucidity, 'the machine establishes its truth, not by logical argument, but by providing an *experience*' (Sekula, 2003, p.448).

On the problematic between experience, and the technological transmission of cultural form, in contradiction to the supposition of the aura in art, Breer's single-frame aesthetic is interpreted as unique in its provocative dis-enchantment of the animated form, from which its interrogation of art itself arises, along with its institutional bounds and imbrication with the politics of exclusion. This has become recognizable in more detailed ways, and gains a contemporary valence, at this particular historical juncture, as it enters into constellation with aspects of the present, such as, the *postmedium* condition of art, and as part of its ontologically *postconceptual* shift. Expanding the critical frameworks in which Breer's approach to the conjunction of animation-film and art could be explored, Benjamin's notion of the 'destructive character' has been drawn upon. The problematic of melancholic contemplation, becomes part of a structure of scrutiny that does not necessarily terminate in a corrosive inactivity and indetermination but may, rather, be part of a critical negation which destabilizes and denaturalizes meaning as it confronts the expressive communicability of the everyday, and the machinic assemblages of life and the interjections of non-life.

This appeal to the prediscursive realm of material immediacy, however, refrains from an extensive mythification, by tracing along the thresholds of experience, and is allied by Breer with the destruction of narrative continuity, and the hierarchies of subject and ground relations. These transient passages become tactics within montaged constructions that resonate, with the Benjaminian figure of the *aesthetic engineer*, generating new relations amongst things, and a distinctly critical route into the provisional object of animation. Breer's formal strategies touch on aspects of art and culture's increasingly commodified status within modern life while holding out art's promise, as it reflects aspects of societal alienation, yet also evokes the powerful potential of art's estrangement and 'ideological disinvestment from the day-to-day commodified transfer of knowledge into capital' as a non-instrumentalised mode of labour.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ (Roberts, 2015, p.34)

Breer's cinematic mode of collage has been argued not to merely re-present, 'the melancholy subjectivity of late capitalism',¹⁴¹ rather, the materialist perspective of the work, has presented a challenge in its eschewal an overtly didactic, *representation of politics*, that nevertheless encourages the comprehension of form and its debates, as it reflects on modern life through the critical optic of animation-film, in a manner that does not collapse inevitably into a depoliticized aestheticism. Benjamin's notion of the destruction of the aura is not taken in wholly negative terms, but as part of the dynamics of presence, (characterized here as an impenetrable distance and continuity with the power structures of tradition) which has stimulated a fuller appreciation of the critical optic of Breer's *neo-avant-garde* practice. The auratic presence, original authority, and integrity of the object, once handed over through the mandate and mechanisms of tradition, becomes, fundamentally complicated within *neo-avant-garde* practices, as well for Breer's work through questions posed by technology, and technical reproducibility, in which an intensified political relation to the conventional hierarchies of form in art and life, and its dissemination can be raised. The realigned boundaries and contiguous juxtapositions also become a mediation with the life-situation of the active-viewer, the viewing-expert, the spectator becoming critic, in ways that refuse a passively, contemplative mode of reception.

In these ways it has been important not to inadvertently obliterate the political and aesthetic complexity of the struggles within Breer's practice through a celebration of pluralism that razes, rather than, brings to light, or 'takes seriously' the materiality, or *differential-specificity* of the treatment of the medium, and the confluence of different traditions entangled in the machinations of Breer's films while touching on the broader implications of its form. This thesis traces the ways Breer's work is shaped in part by the struggle for the recognizability of this shifting problematic, in which newly 'expanded' paradigms were, nevertheless, still largely tethered back to traditional mediums of painting and sculpture etc.

However, when considering Breer's work in relation to the politics of experience and aesthetics, the possibility of a non-proscriptive scope for the transformative potential of the figure of the *aesthetic engineer* has been raised, that allows for a recovery of the timely difficulties of the work and shifting parameters of the power and force of the aesthetic. The materialist aspects of Breer's work point to the possible rupture of the everyday through the poetic processes of estrangement that simultaneously draws attention through reflection (on a politics of the everyday) to the opacity of everyday appearance.¹⁴² The dynamic of the *aesthetic engineer* and conversely the question of Breer's commitment to art's aesthetic autonomy (which is developed here as a critical

¹⁴¹ (Pensky, 1993, p.208)

¹⁴² Affiliated with Benjamin's notion of the 'Author as Producer', which aims to circumvent bourgeois capitalism's mode of constantly revolutionizing the instruments and relations of production which creates 'a world after its own image'. (Marx & Engels, 1967, p.84)

mode of negation under capitalism) has likewise been raised as an interjection into recent debates rooted in problems of art's materiality.

To this extent, the notion of art's aesthetic significance as the 'unconscious writing of history, as anamnesis of the vanquished, of the repressed, and perhaps of what is possible', as Adorno (1997, p.335) argues, must remain a vital aspect of art's openness to its possible recognizability in the space of difference presented by the future, and not necessarily a representation of politics already claimed by the present. The navigation of experience, and its relation between new technologies, the subject and cultural form remains vital amidst the continued display of the complicity of art with the spectacle of power, or conversely, the powerful and insistent need for art to be compelled into the services of political advocacy. However, probing the specific forces of art's aesthetic dimension and the changing qualities within its demand for a non-instrumentalized and heteronomous autonomy as part of its critical potential must also be continually rethought in relation to the contemporary developments in art. To address these changing relations within animation and experimental film, and to develop upon the work done here, it is important to focus upon the intersection of a materialist perspective that moves beyond an apparent gender-neutrality towards the possibility of a feminist aesthetics that does not become a preoccupation with female subjectivity or identity. This approach would moreover tackle the problematic of the differentiation of politics from aesthetics, or art's unmediated politicization from an enquiry into a melancholic politics to address what Ziarek (2012, p.75) has called the 'melancholic conditions of modernity'. This would delve further into contemporary thought and especially feminist engagements with political modernism, including Benjamin's notions of allegory, melancholy and language, and Adorno's critique of aesthetics to deal with experimental form, the embodiment of language, ironic ambiguity and the assemblages of melancholy as part of the cinematic poetics of artists, such as, Lis Rhodes, Rose Lowder, Joyce Wieland, and Hito Steyerl.

APPENDIX A

Translation of the French audiotrack for Recreation, 1956

Along with a transcription of the text (copied below) it was noted by Burford (1999, p.110) that Noël Burch checked the transcript and made corrections in italics and quotation marks around a section, which he became uncertain of and can no longer definitively recall. Pip Chodorov the founder of RE:Voir, Paris which distributes experimental films including Breer's work has also sent a transcript that furthermore indicates with the symbol « Š » what is indecipherable to the ear. I have signaled the way the passages differ below by bold typeface.

Une surface grise brouillée parsemée de *losanges* noirs s'étend indéfiniment en tous sens et c'est précisément à cinq centimètres au-dessus d'elle qu'aura lieu cette récréation.

Surgi brusquement, d'un point de lumière verdâtre, le mystérieux objet contondant esquisse trois circonvolutions extrasensorielles puis s'en va se parer pour les petits lits blancs. Inimitablement circonstancielle, une grisaille opaque est un tannage *à bittes*. Cette structure noire n'est pas ajourée malgré les apparences qui résultent de la convergence fortuite **d'une triple série d'oscillations se dédoublant réciproquement et non pas de la simple 'félicité culinaire' comme on pourrait le croire**. Ces jours apparents ne sont pas non plus carrés étant très légèrement incurvés vers le haut et vers le bas plein **de sève populaire. Mais** le passage fulgurant d'une agglomération **compacte de carlingues inoxydables n'est guère fait pour nous ébahir car il laisse à peine des traces** et le monde septuagénaire sourit sans fin.

Une surface grise brouillée parsemée de **pleins de tâches** noires s'étend indéfiniment en tous sens et c'est précisément à cinq centimètres au-dessus d'elle qu'aura lieu cette récréation.

Surgit brusquement d'un point de lumière verdâtre, le mystérieux objet contendant esquisse trois circonvolutions extra sensorielles puis s'en va se parer pour les petits lits blancs «Š» Inimitablement circonstancielle une grisaille opaque est un tannage **habille**. Cette structure noire n'est pas ajourée malgré les apparences qui résulte de la convergences fortuite **de ses «Š» déduisant réciproquement et non pas de la «Š» sullinaire comme on pourrait le croire**. Ces jours apparents ne sont pas non

plus carrés étant très légèrement incurvés vers le haut et vers bas pleins de «Š». Le passage fulgurant d'une agglomération «Š» et le monde septuagénaire sourit sans fin.¹⁴³

The phrases Chodorov notes in a correspondence may be reworked from Lautréamont, a poet who influenced the surrealists and Situationists and who theorized a conception of 'plagiarism (with permutation)' as a poetics, in 'liberation from itself'. (Scott, 2010, p.54)

A blurred greyish surface scattered with black lozenges indefinitely spreads in all directions and it is exactly five cm above it that this amusement (break) [*recreation*] will take place.

Suddenly (sharply) emerging, from a greenish dot (puncture) of light, the mysterious blunt object roughly draws three extrasensorial circumvolutions and leaves to prepare for the little white beds. Inimitably circumstantial, an opaque grisaille (dullness) is pitching for bitts (bollards). The black structure is not perforated (fretwork, openwork) in spite of the appearances which result from the chance convergence of a triple series of oscillations (swings, rockings) which mutually split (unfold), and in no way from the mere 'culinary felicity' (bliss) as might well be thought. These apparent openings [*frames*] are no longer square as they slightly curve upwards and downwards full of popular sap. But the lightning (dazzling) passage (flying by) of a solid conglomeration [*concentrated collection*] of 'inoxydable cabins' [*stainless/rustproof cargo*] is hardly devised to astound (stagger) us since it hardly leaves a single mark (trace) and the septuagenarian [*seventy-year old*] world rolls on, smiling, endlessly [*without finish*].¹⁴⁴ [*my addition in italics*]

¹⁴³ Transcript and correspondence with Pip Chodorov, FrameWorks Digest, Vol 17, Issue 40, 28th October, 2011

¹⁴⁴ Translated by Alain Blayac November 2011.

Blayac also notes that 'récréation' is both entertainment, amusement but also a 'break' from school. 'Tangage à bittes' is probably a sailing reference, 'bitte' is 'bollard', pitching is 'tangage' or may be a risky allusion to male genitals, but he doesn't think this is likely to be so. 'Petits lits blancs' is a clear allusion to a mundane national charity in the 50's and 60's to 'the bal (ball) des petits lits blancs' that was done in favor of sick children in French hospitals. [via email exchange]

APPENDIX B

Practice-related Report

The concerns of the practice-related work included on the disc of three short animation sketches, took root during a period in which analogue technology was increasingly being rendered obsolescent as part of the consequences of the so-called digital revolution, and arose in the context of anxieties surrounding the apparently renewed, but this time, digital dematerialization of art. Nevertheless, for those without a previously deep-seated relation to the analogue technologies of photography and film, the motives for its prolongation tied to the assumption of the increasingly auritized status of the materiality of film, often seemed part of the increasingly uncritical reception of such techniques.

My route into the contemporary questions of art was through the looking-glass of structural-materialist and avant-garde film, and coincided with the contemporary inclination to revisit the legacy of modernisms after ‘the passing of the postmodern’.¹⁴⁵ The practice-related component began as part of a return to the problem of the medium and its *differential-specificity*, leading to broader questions about materiality and materialisms, and in this way became increasingly cognizant of difficulties that the ‘politics of aesthetics’¹⁴⁶ presents for the current juncture. As part of a distance sought from the then predominant disciplinary framework of animation, the animation-sketches began with the single-frame as part of a working through of an elected or nominated basis of the medium. This was spurred initially by Gidal’s (1989, pp.18, 17) arguments toward a materialist process in film, in which content primarily functions by its ‘constant procedural work’, ‘to bring forth the filmic event’. Upon which he continued, that an ‘anti-illusionist materialist cinema is one which does not give the illusion of having dispensed with such questions. But such work, simultaneously, is not just a defensive practice against some hegemonic given against which it must constantly rail [...]. It equally forcefully has its own history, another history’. In many ways the thesis has been part of a reflection upon such a possible history of animation, which to an extent attempts to reinvent animation as an art form through the ways in which Breer situates his work. To this extent, the work of Gidal and Breer present two spheres of influence against which the animated-sketches here struggle.

¹⁴⁵ (Smith, 2008, p.1)

¹⁴⁶ Burgin (1986a, p.85) defends his *photoconceptual* work in terms of ‘the politics of representation’ and against the charge of failure when measured by the criteria of the ‘representation of politics’ and its counter-ideological effectiveness.

The study of Breer's aesthetic research, which refigures animation-film in terms, for instance, of the conceptual valence of materials, text, audio, its graphic aspects, along with its photographic condition presented an early expression of grappling with the analogue conversion of media. This had implications for the debates on the digital convergence of media, framed in terms of the overstated divisions between the analogue and the digital that have likewise been touched on in the thesis.

Questions about the materiality of the digital image, including the ways in which the hybridity of its surface elements continue to lay claim upon the real, along with the uncertain status and contradictory specificity of the still were explored within the practice component during a period when the myth of digital dematerialization was, at once, popularly hyped and critically disputed. And while the literal identity of the object is often captured by the photographic of whatever kind, only rarely is its singularity materialized. Despite the pervasive sense of the constructedness of the image today, the possibility that matter may yet be configured to play against the hegemony of meaning remains of an underlying importance.



Figure 100. Sonia Bridge, *Test.Drive.Archive*. (16min excerpt from recursively-generated frames, silent).

Test.Drive.Archive. employs as its material and structure the quadrant framing and limited animation of a test-role of film from an old plastic lomo-camera. It was randomly shot on a highway drive, and spirals in an anti-clockwise manner through the stack of exposures as it zooms into the level of the pixel, a journey past the print surface and into its digital components.

Exploring the paradoxical relations of the still image to animated movement, the work plays with the myth of the modernist spatio-temporal grid, a surface suspended between the material and the immaterial in relation to the pixel grid of digitization. Its rigid patterning is shot through and overpowered by the random elements of its analogue capture. This work in conjunction with *The Distance Consumed* raises the question of remembrance, photographically induced memory, and the commodified spectacle of the picturesque souvenir. The ephemerality of the original objects sourced become durational fragments in the breakdown and extrapolation that forms the basis of the work's structural interrogation. Journeys are made and remade, in a refractive doubling back in search of the object.



Figure 101. Bridge, *The Distance Consumed*, (5min., sound).

The Distance Consumed is an animation-sketch generated out of the tension between an implicit yet, doubtful sense of the languid, bygone moments within the domestic sphere, associated with the

assembly of picturesque and idyllic scenes of faraway places, taken from an unremarkable collection of jigsaw puzzles, and offset by the adverse banality of the potentially extreme situations evinced by the audio-track compiled from fragments of emergency services radio communications. The jigsaw pieces become pixel-like elements in a voyage across these image-objects, which slip between the surface and depth of the picture plane.

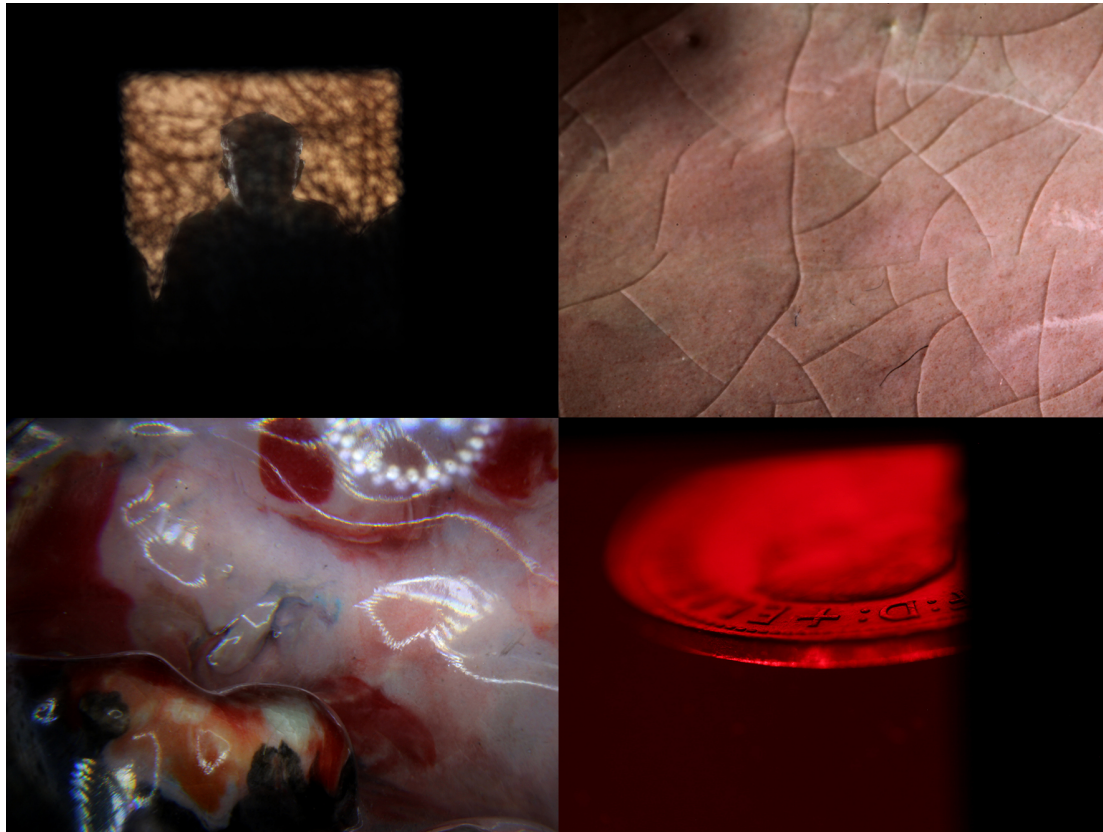


Figure 102. Bridge, *The Beast with Two Backs*, (5min., sound).

The Beast with Two Backs is an animation-sketch which began with pixilated movement, not of the fluidity of Claymation, but the lusciously crude, tactile and often brazenly contorted, glazed ceramic figurines made by artist Paulina Minchowska, in a deflated pantomimic rococo-like gaze of sexualized attitudes. These are interspersed with the straight-laced mass-produced figures of architectural models and both are brushed against by a female computer-voiced excerpt from *The Fall of Bluebeard*, 1997, by Nicholas Ford, a self-obsessed but also self-excoriating tale of the masculine imaginary.

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